

Anything but Quiet: Essays on the Metaphysics of Normativity



Farbod Akhlaghi-Ghaffarokh
St Anne's College
University of Oxford

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Abstract

This thesis concerns the meta-metaphysics of morality and of normativity more generally. Normative metaphysics often proceeds without much engagement with meta-metaphysics. My first aim is to rectify this neglect and encourage its broader correction. I do this by offering a sympathetic yet critical discussion of the so-called ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’ normative realism of Derek Parfit, John Skorupski, and Tim Scanlon. This discussion illustrates how attention to meta-metaphysics can demystify such views and explain their attractive features, the difficulties they face, and what meta-ethicists and meta-metaphysicians stand to gain from engagement with one another. My second aim is to explore two questions my discussion raises: is the moral error theory epistemically possible and, if so, what follows? And is there a way to generate a view in the spirit of ‘quietist’ views that appeals to assumptions likely held by their opponents?

Chapter 1 sympathetically develops Parfit’s non-realist cognitivism by appeal to truthmaker theory and reveals a troubling dilemma. Chapter 2 develops a response to this dilemma that suggests that non-realist cognitivism can be plausibly developed into what I call normative trivialism. Chapter 3 concerns Skorupski’s irrealist cognitivism and Meinongian meta-ethical theories in general, where I argue that we have good reason to pay attention to such views, dispel some misunderstandings of them, and argue that Skorupski’s irrealist cognitivism faces strong objections. Chapter 4 develops Scanlon’s novel theory and the background meta-metaphysics it relies upon, arguing that whilst my development can respond to common objections to Scanlon’s theory, it highlights novel challenges. Chapter 5 offers an argument from the epistemic possibility of the moral error theory against each of the aforementioned views, as well as any form of moral non-cognitivism and moral naturalism. Chapter 6 argues that if three widely held views are true, then the naturalism/non-naturalism debate is settled by ethical debate and concerned meta-ethicists should do normative ethics instead. I conclude whilst noting that, properly understood, ‘meta-ethical quietism’ is anything but quiet.

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Publication Note

Some of the material in this thesis has been published or is forthcoming. I indicate this in footnotes at the beginning of the relevant chapters. Chapter 1 is a version of:

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Chapter 5 is an extended and revised version of:

- (2) Akhlaghi, Farbod. (2021a). On the Possibility of Wholesale Moral Error. *Ratio* 34 (3): 236–247.

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Two published and one forthcoming work of mine are cited in this thesis. The first in Chapter 3, the second in Chapter 6, and the third in the Conclusion:

- (3) Akhlaghi-Ghaffarokh, Farbod. (2018). Existence, Mathematical Nominalism, and Meta-Ontology: An Objection to Azzouni on Criteria for Existence. *Philosophia Mathematica* 26 (2): 251–265.
- (4) Akhlaghi, Farbod. (2021b). Does the Unity of Grounding Matter? *Mind* Advance Access: 1–11.
- (5) Akhlaghi, Farbod. (Forthcoming–2). Meta-Ethical Quietism? Wittgenstein, Relaxed Realism, and Countercultures in Ethics. In *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, edited by Jon Beale & Richard Rowland, London: Routledge Publishing.

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Introduction

But if I'm right in thinking that received meta-normative options in current discussion have reached a stalemate, it's not surprising that progress can be made only if some dearly held doctrines are discarded.

John Skorupski (2012a: 181–182)

This thesis comprises six distinct but thematically related papers. They have two aims. The first four papers aim to rectify the mutual neglect of contemporary meta-metaphysics and meta-ethics by demonstrating how bringing them into discussion allows us to demystify, clarify, and evaluate some so-called ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’ views in meta-ethics.¹ Doing so also reveals some of what meta-metaphysicians would gain from engagement with normative metaphysics. The final two papers explore two questions respectively that pursuit of the first aim raises: is the moral error theory epistemically possible and, if so, what follows? And is there a way to dismiss some standard moral metaphysical debate by appeal to assumptions that participants to those debates likely accept?

Let me explain. The most difficult philosophical terrain is often found in debates over how to understand a question, how to distinguish between competing answers, what considerations are relevant to answering the question, and what counts as a good answer to the question in the first place. The metaphysics of morality and of normativity is, by that metric, some of the most difficult terrain to navigate today.

Despite this, it is a peculiar fact that meta-ethics has largely ignored contemporary meta-metaphysics and the resources it offers to help clarify the nature of metaphysical and ontological

¹ A terminological point: I take ‘metaphysics’ to denote the examination of the nature of reality and ‘ontology’ to denote investigation into what exists; I use ‘metaphysics’ in such a way as to include ontology. I use ‘meta-ontology’ to refer to the sub-discipline of philosophy that asks how to understand and conduct investigation into what exists, and ‘meta-metaphysics’ to refer to that sub-discipline that asks how to understand and conduct investigation into the nature of reality; and I take ‘meta-metaphysics’ to include investigation into the nature of ontology.

enquiry. Meta-metaphysics too has largely ignored contemporary meta-ethics and robbed itself of a rich case study. Why is hard to say, but not my concern here. Instead, I aim first to argue that this mutual neglect is a mistake and thereby to encourage its correction.

One way to do that would be to argue from first principles about why their mutual engagement is important for one or both sub-disciplines. That is not my approach here. Rather, I aim to *show* the reader why this mutual neglect is a mistake in a suitably restricted way. I do this by offering a sympathetic yet critical discussion of some theories that I believe have been misunderstood and inappropriately engaged with *because* of the lack of explicit meta-metaphysical reflection in meta-ethics.

These are the meta-ethical theories of Derek Parfit, John Skorupski, and Tim Scanlon. Alleged representatives of so-called ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’ realism, fellow quietists supposedly include Ronald Dworkin, Matthew Kramer, Thomas Nagel, and John McDowell. One might expect, then, that I will provide a general characterisation of such quietism. I think, however, that no informative characterisation can be had. For the views they defend, as will become clear, are not tokens of one type of theory. At best, we can say that they aim to show how one might hold a non-reductive, non-naturalistic normative realism whilst avoiding some or all objections to that view as commonly understood. But to positively characterise these theories requires us to do some meta-metaphysics and attend to their meta-metaphysical commitments. Doing so will reveal that there is no clear way to characterise such theories within the taxonomic practices commonly employed in meta-ethics, as such practices presuppose meta-metaphysical commitments these theorists reject.

I will thus not focus, as some others have, upon the distinction between quasi-realism, as defended by, for example, Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, and the theories of Parfit, Skorupski, and Scanlon. First, like many I am unsure whether ‘quasi-realism’ denotes a clear theory. Second, as quasi-realists also destabilise common distinctions between theories, it will be a lengthy distraction here to try to distinguish between views that no one agrees on how to classify. Third, as will become clear, each of Parfit’s, Skorupski’s, and Scanlon’s views depend upon meta-metaphysical claims that go far beyond anything offered by most quasi-realists. Whilst I am alive to this issue and briefly remark upon it in what follows, if you remain convinced that the latter views are quasi-realism in disguise, then you can read much of this thesis as exploring new ways of being a quasi-realist. Moreover, you may even read them as filling in important details that other quasi-realists remain silent upon.

As we will see, each of the ‘quietist’ views I explore forces a revision of how to understand what a moral error theory could be. This prompts my asking: is a moral error theory epistemically possible and, if so, what follows from this? Moreover, each of their views employs highly controversial assumptions to dismiss some metaphysical debates as their opponents understand them. This prompts my asking: is there a way to develop a view about some or all standard moral metaphysical questions that is similar in spirit but relies upon less controversial assumptions – or, better, upon assumptions their opponents are likely to hold? My second aim is to explore these two questions.

The chapters of this thesis are thus unified by their concern with the meta-metaphysics of morality and normativity more generally, with what I argue are importantly novel meta-ethical theories that force us to engage in the neglected meta-metaphysics of normativity, and with

exploring further questions these concerns raise. They are far from the last word on their subjects and more modestly aim to start and contribute to important debates yet to be had.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1. Non-Realist Cognitivism, Truthmaking, and Ontological Cheating

This chapter explores the meta-ethical theory developed by Derek Parfit, which he called non-realist cognitivism. It is an open secret that the theory is often thought at best puzzling and at worst objectionably unclear. The key to seeing why this is not so is a meta-metaphysical framework largely absent from meta-ethics: truthmaker theory. I offer an account of non-realist cognitivism as adopting truthmaker theory, maintaining that there are irreducibly normative truths that lack truthmakers, and denying truthmaker maximalism, the claim that all truths have truthmakers. This allows a response to every objection commonly raised to non-realist cognitivism, explains its attractions, and clarifies how to argue for it. But it also reveals that the theory faces a troubling dilemma in trying to justify denying that all truths have truthmakers without demotivating truthmaker theory altogether. If it cannot, then either it must accept truthmaker maximalism and become inconsistent, or it must surrender truthmaker theory and obviate the clarification of non-realist cognitivism that it offered. I conclude with some important consequences of bridging the truthmaking and meta-ethics literatures.

Chapter 2. Non-Realist Cognitivism, Necessity, and Triviality

This chapter explores a response to the challenge non-realist cognitivism faces of justifying the adoption of truthmaker theory whilst denying truthmaker maximalism. This response is to maintain that some normative truths are necessary and that necessary truths *simpliciter* lack truthmakers. An analogous position known as mathematical trivialism has been defended in the metaphysics of mathematics by Agustín Rayo and, more generally, by Ross Cameron. I develop a

version of non-realist cognitivism I call normative trivialism. According to normative trivialism, some normative truths are necessary, no necessary truths make demands on the world for their truth because their truth-conditions are trivially met, and so such normative truths are true whilst lacking truthmakers. This view, I argue, not only enjoys the advantages of non-realist cognitivism and evades the dilemma of Chapter 1, but it also has a significant advantage over many other theories: it explains the necessity of necessary normative truths.

Chapter 3. Irrealist Cognitivism, Non-Existence, and Meinongian Meta-Ethics

This chapter explores John Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism and the prospects of Meinongian meta-ethical theories more generally. Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism maintains that there are objectively true, irreducibly normative propositions that concern unreal or non-existent reason relations. This involves adopting a form of Meinongianism, the view that there are entities that do not exist but which have properties and to which we can refer. Irrealist cognitivism, and Meinongianism *simpliciter*, have been largely ignored in meta-ethics. Curiously, Meinongianism's revival in metaphysics has ignored normative metaphysics too. I argue first that this mutual disregard is a mistake and second that Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism faces strong objections that arise from careful attention to the relevant Meinongianism literature. Finally, I argue that this reveals that Meinongian meta-ethical theories are promising theories which deserve attention, and I offer further fruitful avenues for research.

Chapter 4. Relaxed Realism, Ontological Pluralism, and Methodology in Metaphysics

This chapter concerns Scanlon's meta-ethical theory, which I call relaxed realism. Relaxed realism maintains that all ontological and metaphysical questions are domain-specific: to investigate the existence and nature of something we must attend to the standards of its specific subject matter or domain. Crucial details of relaxed realism remain unclear. I argue first,

however, that the best account of relaxed realism accepts the view, known as ontological pluralism, that there are different ways of existing. Scanlon himself appears to do this, despite not engaging with the burgeoning literature on ontological pluralism. Doing so provides crucial details of relaxed realism and generates responses to most objections to it. Second, I argue that relaxed realism faces two serious challenges that it is unclear it can meet. Third, I conclude by pointing out numerous fruitful avenues for further research into relaxed realism, ontological pluralism in meta-ethics, and the challenges relaxed realism raises to all who reject it.

Chapter 5. The Argument from the Epistemic Possibility of Wholesale Moral Error

This chapter addresses a neglected question the previous chapters make more urgent: could a moral error theory be true? It seems so. The mere possibility of its truth might seem inconsequential. I argue that it is not. I develop an argument from the epistemic possibility of morality being subject to some form of wholesale moral error, that is, error of the kind that would make a moral error theory true. This argument targets any form of moral non-cognitivism and moral naturalism, in addition to non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, or relaxed realism. This provides independent reason to accept Derek Parfit's infamous claim that if there are no non-natural moral truths then nothing matters, providing an indirect response to recent objections to that claim. I conclude that whether wholesale moral error is epistemically possible may be an issue which 'puts everything up for grabs at once' and, if so, this only helps highlight the significance of my argument.

Chapter 6. Grounding, Ethics, and (Much of) Moral Metaphysics

This chapter offers a way to usurp standard moral metaphysical debate over naturalism and non-naturalism with ethical debate alone that, perhaps surprisingly, arises from reflection on a notion

taken to aid moral metaphysics: grounding.² Grounding is increasingly appealed to in characterising the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism, and to explain the explanatory notion intimated by phrases such as ‘because’, ‘makes’, and ‘in virtue of’ in normative ethics. Relatedly, an influential view in metaphysics more generally, and recently in meta-ethics, is that there is only one notion of grounding. I argue that if all these claims are true, then we should stop doing (much of) moral metaphysics; meta-ethicists who wish to discover the nature of moral facts should do normative ethics instead. This offers a way to dismiss standard moral metaphysical debate, in the spirit of both ‘quietist’ views and ‘quasi-realist’ views, by appeal to less controversial assumptions that are likely shared by many who oppose the conclusion that I argue they together entail.

² A terminological point: there is much debate about how to distinguish between natural and non-natural facts, properties, relations, *inter alia*. I cannot resolve that here and follow others in assuming a distinction between them. I take the physical as paradigmatic examples of the natural and take the non-natural to be *sui generis* facts, properties, relations, *inter alia*, that are not identical with, reducible to, or fully explained by the natural.

Chapter 1

Non-Realist Cognitivism, Truthmaking, and Ontological

Cheating

§1. Introduction

Meta-ethicists are much concerned with Derek Parfit's objections to meta-ethical theories other than his own.³ It is an open secret, however, that they remain perplexed by Parfit's positive view he called non-realist cognitivism.

Non-realist cognitivism endorses a range of traditional non-naturalist realist commitments about the metaphysics of normativity. But it adds that true irreducibly normative claims are not 'made to be true by correctly describing, or corresponding to, how things are in some part of reality', that is, their truth has 'no ontological implications' (Parfit 2017: 58–59; 2011: 486). Normative facts and properties, non-realist cognitivism maintains, exist only in a 'non-ontological' sense of 'exist' and do not face any 'difficult ontological questions', avoiding ontological objections altogether (Parfit 2017: 62).

Non-realist cognitivism is typically only mentioned through quotations from Parfit, sometimes partially unpacked only to be rejected as objectionably unclear, or less commonly directly engaged with (though never sympathetically).⁴ There is an explanation for this. First,

³ This chapter is a version of my paper of the same name forthcoming in *Ethics*.

⁴ For examples of the first and second see Enoch (2011: §5.3); Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014); Cowie (2014); Gasser (2018); Bykvist & Olson (2019). For the third, see Suikkanen (2017); Mintz-Woo (2018); Veluwenkamp (2017); and Copp (2018).

Parfit's claims above are notoriously difficult to plausibly interpret.⁵ Second, such interpretive difficulty generates further unclarity regarding how to assess non-realist cognitivism.

Underlying these concerns about non-realist cognitivism's intelligibility and plausibility is a thought that I suspect is often had but rarely expressed: non-realist cognitivism *seems like cheating*. For positing a 'non-ontological' sense of existence for normative phenomena looks ad-hoc, made solely to insulate seemingly non-naturalist realist commitments from what some believe are decisive ontological objections.

In this chapter, I have three related aims. First, to provide an account of non-realist cognitivism that eliminates common charges of objectionable unclarity and illuminates the hitherto opaque dialectical situation surrounding it, by appeal to truthmaker theory. Second, to develop the above-mentioned cheating intuition into an objection that ultimately reveals a dilemma for the best reading of non-realist cognitivism. Third, to begin bridging the largely unexplored gulf between the metaphysics of normativity and truthmaker theory.

I proceed as follows. In §2, I introduce Parfit's non-realist cognitivism as he presents it and motivate concern with its plausibility. In §3, I, first, introduce truthmaker theory and present the ontological cheating objection. Second, I demonstrate how this objection reveals the most compelling reading of non-realist cognitivism to date, shows how it might block my objection, and clarifies the dialectical situation surrounding it. In §4, I first examine a promising way to argue for non-realist cognitivism. Then, I argue that non-realist cognitivism faces a dilemma and explore whether this dilemma can plausibly be escaped. I conclude, in §5, with three

⁵ For some recent attempts, see van Roojen (2017); Skorupski (2018); Laskowski (2018); and Bykvist & Olson (2019).

consequences of the foregoing for the metaphysics of normativity, truthmaking, and their radically underexplored relationship.

Note that my primary concern is with the intelligibility and plausibility of non-realist cognitivism *simpliciter*. So, this chapter is not an exercise in Parfit scholarship but, rather, takes developing the most plausible account of Parfit's non-realist cognitivism as a starting point whilst the object of analysis remains non-realist cognitivism itself. I do think that the form of non-realist cognitivism unearthed below is charitably interpreted as Parfit's own for reasons provided in §3, but it is not my aim to demonstrate that here. Let's begin.

§2. Non-Realist Cognitivism?

Consider,

- (A) It is illegal to steal.
- (B) It is impolite to eat with your mouth open.
- (C) 'Lovee' is a misspelling of 'love' in English.
- (D) Mary's hitting John was morally wrong.
- (E) Lucy's being a biochemist is reason to believe that she understands the cell-cycle.
- (F) Adam has good reason to take care of his health.

These are first-order normative claims: claims about what an agent has reason or ought to do, think, or feel. They are distinct from purely non-normative claims, such as 'John is injured'.

Parfit (2017: 57) claims there are two senses of 'normative': a 'rule-implying' sense and a 'reason-implying' sense. Examples of the first are (A)-(C). These, he maintains, all express natural

claims, in the sense that their truth is explained in purely natural (e.g., physical or social) terms and is empirically discoverable.

For example, (A) is explained by systems of laws that are created by a community which prohibit certain acts. (B) is explained by widely accepted norms of etiquette in a community and that relevant behaviour violates them. And (C) is explained by certain linguistic rules of a language governing spelling.

(A)-(C) also seem empirically discoverable. One can learn through empirical investigation whether an act violates a law, whether an action contravenes some norm concerning etiquette, or whether a word is spelt incorrectly given the rules of a language.

Parfit claims (D)-(F) are normative truths in his reason-implying sense and that, in this sense, (D)-(F) express truths that are neither explained in naturalistic terms nor are empirically discoverable.

Take (D), a normative moral claim. Parfit claims the moral wrongness of Mary's hitting John cannot be fully explained (or reduced to) some purely natural facts, properties, or relations (e.g., the fact that hitting John caused him pain). Nor can there be any empirical evidence regarding (D): whether it was morally wrong for Mary to hit John, Parfit thinks, is not the kind of claim that one can have empirical evidence for or against. *Mutatis mutandis* for (E), a normative epistemic claim, and (F), a prudential normative claim about (non-moral) reasons for action.⁶

⁶ Henceforth I use 'normative' only in Parfit's 'reason-implying' sense.

It is regarding normative claims in this reason-implying sense that Parfit's non-realist cognitivist accepts:

(Existence): Normative facts, properties, and relations exist.

(Cognitivism): Normative claims express truth-apt beliefs that purport to describe normative facts, properties, and relations.

(Non-Error-Theory): Some normative claims are true.

(Non-Relativity): True normative claims are true non-relativistically.⁷

(Non-Naturalism): Normative facts, properties, and relations are not fully explained by, reducible to, or identical with natural facts, properties, and relations.

So far formulated, this view is indistinguishable from so-called 'robust' or 'metaphysically heavy' non-naturalist normative realism. Defended by, amongst others, David Enoch (2007, 2011), William FitzPatrick (2008, 2018), and Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), non-naturalist normative realism also endorses the above claims.⁸

These theorists typically acknowledge that their metaphysical commitments, such as (Existence) and (Non-Naturalism), are *prima facie* problematic. For example, Enoch (2011: 136) grants that there is a 'serious metaphysical worry' for non-naturalist normative realism which

⁷ I use 'non-relativistically' to remain neutral on how to formulate the proposed objectivity of normative claims. Candidates include, amongst others, 'stance-independence' (Shafer-Landau 2003: 15) and some form of 'agent-' or 'observer-independence' (Enoch 2011: 3–4).

⁸ Other defenders include Huemer (2005); Hampton (1998); and Wielenberg (2014).

costs it some ‘plausibility points’, but he maintains that the theory can successfully defend these commitments. These worries include familiar queerness, ontological parsimony, and supervenience objections.⁹

Parfit appears to endorse the same metaphysical claims that non-naturalist normative realists typically grant raise *prima facie* worries for their view. But he is adamant that they *do not* generate *any* ontological objections. For the crucial difference, Parfit suggests, between non-naturalist normative realists (what he calls ‘*Metaphysical Non-Naturalism*’) and non-realist cognitivism is that:

Metaphysical Non-Naturalists believe that, when we make irreducibly normative claims, these claims imply that there exist some ontologically weighty non-natural entities or properties. Naturalists find such claims mysterious or incredible. Non-Realist Cognitivists deny that normative claims have any such ontological implications. On this view, normative claims are not made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality. (Parfit 2017: 60)

That is, Parfit’s non-realist cognitivism denies whilst non-naturalist normative realism accepts:

(Alethic Realism): ‘All true claims are made to be true by the way in which these claims correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality.’ (Parfit 2017: 58) (AR)

⁹ For an excellent overview, see Ridge (2003).

Parfit seems to think that because non-naturalist normative realism accepts (AR), and claims some normative propositions are true, the theory is committed to believing ‘some part of reality’ makes such claims true. Since non-naturalist normative realism accepts (Non-Naturalism), it must admit the existence of irreducibly normative facts, properties, and relations. The positing of these entities is what generates the ‘serious metaphysical worry’ Enoch acknowledges.

But, Parfit claims, non-realist cognitivism comes with no such ontological commitment, seemingly because it denies (AR).¹⁰ Non-realist cognitivism attempts to maintain that true irreducibly normative claims are not made true by anything that exists ‘either as natural properties in the spatio-temporal world, or in some non-spatio-temporal realm’ (Parfit 2011: 486).

Parfit claims that logical, mathematical, and necessity claims are also true in this way, provocatively stating:

If we are Non-Realist Cognitivists, we deny that [...] logical and modal claims are made to be true by there being some part of reality which these claims correctly describe, or to which they correspond. If there is any dependence here, this dependence would go the other way. It would be reality that must correspond to these truths. Not even an omnipotent God could have made it false that two plus two equals four. (Parfit 2017: 59)

Instead, Parfit claims normative (and certain other) claims concern phenomena that exist only in a ‘non-ontological’ sense of ‘exist’, failing to have any ‘ontological status’ (Parfit 2011: 487). Talk of normative properties, Parfit argues, is *merely pleonastic*. That is, claims about an

¹⁰ Denial of (AR) is what is ‘non-realist’ about non-realist cognitivism.

action having a normative property adds nothing to the content of a claim made using ordinary predication: ‘x has the property of being a reason’ adds nothing to the content of the claim that ‘x is a reason’.

But if normative property talk is merely pleonastic, then do normative properties themselves exist? If so, is this not just non-naturalist normative realism? Parfit’s reply is that there just is ‘no clear question’ whether normative properties exist as part of reality (Parfit 2011: 479). Rather, he thinks the only sense of normative properties existing is captured by distinguishing between multiple senses of ‘exist’ and taking normative properties to exist only in a ‘non-ontological’ sense.

The reader will rightfully be puzzled by these claims. Before addressing this, I note three good reasons to address the plausibility of non-realist cognitivism.

First, if plausible, non-realist cognitivism offers a deeply attractive alternative to traditional non-naturalism by avoiding metaphysical objections that have plagued it and which many take to be decisive. Second, it promises an alternative to Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard’s quasi-realism, which many have rejected due to, *inter alia*, its non-cognitivism.¹¹ And, third, if plausible, non-realist cognitivism would radically undermine a strong motivation for naturalism and normative error theories: non-naturalism’s seeming incompatibility with naturalism about reality more generally. This would reveal such a motivation entirely misguided, drastically altering a cornerstone of the meta-ethical landscape.

¹¹ Some worry that non-realist cognitivism is just quasi-realism in disguise (see Böddeling 2020). Parfit (2017: 63–64) claims that the best version of quasi-realism is a version of non-realist cognitivism. For reasons provided in the Introduction, I bracket this issue. I shall assume quasi-realism and non-cognitivism are distinct, in keeping with the thought that non-realist cognitivism is a novel but unclearly articulated theory, whilst remaining neutral about precisely how to characterise this distinction here.

§3. Truthmaking, Ontological Cheating, and the Real Non-Realist Cognitivism

§3.1. Truthmaking and Ontological Cheating

Interpreting non-realist cognitivism is no trivial task. No reading of it in the literature has been widely accepted as even *prima facie* plausible. This leaves the theory, and how to assess it, deeply unclear. Concerns of unclarity alone, however, are clearly too quick to dismiss non-realist cognitivism.

Behind them, I've suggested, is this intuition: non-realist cognitivism *seems like cheating*. For how could there be true irreducibly normative propositions that do not incur ontological commitment, that are about entities existing only in some 'non-ontological' sense, and which evade ontological objections?

One might appeal to Parfit's non-realist cognitivism endorsing,

(Plural): There are multiple senses of 'exist' and 'there are/is'. One of these senses is a 'non-ontological' sense.

(Non-Ontological-Normative): Normative facts, properties, and relations exist only in a 'non-ontological' sense of 'exist'.

Since, if true, it seems *trivial* that what exists in a 'non-ontological' sense is neither an ontological commitment nor open to ontological objections. But not only is it unclear what this sense of 'exist' amounts to – Parfit nowhere tells us – but *even if* we charitably grant the *intelligibility* of this sense of 'exist', why think that normative, mathematical, or any other

phenomena exist *only* in this sense? Nothing in the mere positing of this sense of ‘exist’ shows this, and that is what non-realist cognitivism needs (Mintz-Woo 2018).¹²

So, the cheating intuition remains. But is it more than *just* an intuition?

Yes. For one may suspect non-realist cognitivism is guilty of what truthmaker theorists call *ontological cheating*. To ontologically cheat is to accept some claim as true in one’s theory whilst refusing to accept the ontology seemingly necessary to make it true, and, in so doing, illicitly evading ontological objections to one’s theory.¹³

To explain: first, distinguish between *traditional theories of truth* and *truthmaker theory*. The former address whether truth is a property and, if so, what kind of property. Familiar views here include correspondence, coherence, epistemic, deflationary, and primitivist theories.

Truthmaker theory aims to capture this deeply plausible intuition about the relationship between truth and the world:

(World-to-Truth): ‘Necessarily, truth is not a fundamental feature of reality; what is true depends upon the world.’ (Asay & Baron 2020: 6)

The thought: what is true metaphysically depends asymmetrically upon the world being some way *for it to be true*. Take <the rose is red>.¹⁴ Its truth-value appears anchored to the world such that it cannot vary independently of the world: it is true when the rose is red and false otherwise. And whilst the proposition’s truth-value depends upon the world, the world’s having

¹² Relatedly, Olson (2018) and Gasser (2018) argue that Parfit’s (Plural) is unmotivated.

¹³ See MacBride (2019): §3.1 and references therein.

¹⁴ In this chapter, I use angled brackets to refer to a proposition: ‘<p>’ means ‘the proposition that p’.

a red rose in it does not depend upon the proposition's truth-value. *Mutatis mutandis* for other truths.¹⁵

Truthmaker theorists argue that to capture this intuitive dependence, we must admit of *truthbearers*, *truthmakers*, and a *truthmaking relation*.¹⁶ The former are those things that are made true, the latter those that make the former true, and they are related by the truthmaking relation,

(Truthmaking): For all x , x is true iff (and because) there is a y such that y makes x true.

Here 'makes' indicates a non-causal, non-conceptual, asymmetric metaphysical explanation. The thought is not that the rose's being red *causes* <the rose is red> to be true, nor that it is true because of the concepts *rose* and *red*. Rather it is that the rose's being red appears to metaphysically explain *that* <the rose is red> is true, and not vice-versa.¹⁷

Truthmaker theorists disagree over, *inter alia*, a) what truthmakers and truthbearers are, b) what the truthmaking relation is, c) whether some or all truths are made true by things in the world, and d) whether truthmakers necessitate the truth of truthbearers.¹⁸

¹⁵ In this chapter, I use 'the world' and 'reality' as truthmaker theorists such that for a proposition to be 'made true by the world' or 'made true by reality', as I'll explain, is to have some entity or type of entity that exists metaphysically explain the truth of that proposition.

¹⁶ Alternative motivations for truthmaker theories include appealing to their explanatory resources in either solving some philosophical problem(s) or vindicating certain attractive views; see Rami (2009).

¹⁷ Truthmaker theory is not a complete *theory* of truth since one can endorse truthmaking without thinking that *what it is* for something to be true is for it to stand in the truthmaking relation. Truthmaker theories are also not correspondence theories in disguise. As will become clear, the correspondence relation is symmetric and reflexive whilst the truthmaking relation is not (David 2009: 146), correspondence is a one-to-one relation whilst truthmaking can have various types of mapping functions, and truthmaking is a dependence relation between a truth and what makes it true whilst correspondence itself is not a dependence relation (Saenz 2020; also see Simpson 2021: 3165–3167). Whilst truthmaking might appear inconsistent with deflationism about truth, this is also contentious (as Simpson 2021 explains) with some even arguing that truthmaking involves commitment *to* a form of deflationism about truth (Asay 2020: 105–135). I cannot settle the precise relationship between truthmaking and traditional theories of truth here. Nor do I need to. For I am granting truthmaker theory (minus one common feature of it that, as we'll see, non-realist cognitivism denies) to non-realist cognitivism to make sense of the view. And when the question of its consistency with traditional theories of truth arises in §4.2., I will charitably assume it consistent with them. If it is not, then, as we'll see there, this is all the worse for non-realist cognitivism.

¹⁸ See Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006: 186–200); Rami (2009); and MacBride (2019) for overviews.

We'll take propositions as truthbearers, and allow ordinary particulars, tropes, states of affairs, or properties to be truthmakers.¹⁹ Next, we'll take the truthmaking relation as a cross-categorical, metaphysical relation that can hold between entities of different kinds which obeys:

(Truthmaker): For every x and proposition $\langle P \rangle$, x is a truthmaker of $\langle P \rangle$ iff $\langle P \rangle$ is true *in virtue of* x . (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2006: 187)

'In virtue of' can be read either as primitive or as an instance of grounding, a form of asymmetric metaphysical explanation typically elucidated through examples like \langle the rose is red \rangle . Other examples include: \langle Lucy exists \rangle is grounded in (i.e., metaphysically explained by) the existence of Lucy, or \langle there is a protest occurring \rangle is grounded in the existence of a group of individuals constituting a protest.

Finally, as others typically do, we'll also take truthmaker theory to endorse:

(Truthmaker Maximalism): For every proposition $\langle P \rangle$, if $\langle P \rangle$ is true, then $\langle P \rangle$ has a truthmaker.

(Truthmaker Necessitarianism): For every x and proposition $\langle P \rangle$, if x is a truthmaker for $\langle P \rangle$, then, necessarily, if x exists then $\langle P \rangle$ is true.²⁰

Call the conjunction of the above *standard truthmaker theory*.

¹⁹ See Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006: 188–190) for a defence.

²⁰ See Armstrong (2004: 5) for discussion.

Now, standard truthmaker theory is often employed to generate ontological cheating objections as follows.²¹ Take,

(Presentism): Only present entities exist.

(Eternalism): Past, present, and future entities exist.

There appear to be true propositions about the past: e.g., <Caesar crossed the Rubicon>. If (Presentism) accepts this then, by standard truthmaker theory, there must be some existents that make those propositions true. But (Presentism) *denies* the existence of plausible truthmakers for such propositions: past entities. So, the objection goes, by accepting the truth of propositions about the past, *without* endorsing the existence of the things that seem necessary to make them true, Presentism ontologically cheats.

Now take <there is a reason to avoid suffering>. Non-realist cognitivism maintains that this and other normative propositions state truth-apt claims about, e.g., the irreducibly normative property of being a reason. They add, however, that such claims are true without incurring *any* ontological commitment, that is, they don't entail there is *anything* that makes them true. But according to (World-to-Truth) and standard truthmaker theory, there *must* be *something* in the world that make such claims true. So, in refusing to accept this, non-realist cognitivism ontologically cheats.

Ontological cheating is a powerful objection. If successful, it shows that non-realist cognitivism is illicitly evading ontological objections by maintaining that irreducibly normative

²¹ Theodore Sider (2001: 40–41) suggests the ‘whole point’ of truthmaker theories is to ‘catch cheaters’.

claims are true without anything in the world making them true. Traditional non-naturalists, contrastingly, accept that *something* must make such claims true, whilst battling to defend introducing irreducibly normative phenomena into our ontology.

§3.2. Real Non-Realist Cognitivism

We must clarify non-realist cognitivism to establish whether it ontologically cheats. I now argue that the ontological cheating objection reveals the best account of non-realist cognitivism so far presented.

Recall,

(Alethic Realism): ‘All true claims are made to be true by the way in which these claims correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality.’ (Parfit 2017: 58, 62)

Parfit argues that rejection of (AR) is what distinguishes non-realist cognitivism from traditional non-naturalism and insulates the former from common metaphysical objections to the latter. In asking how this could be, some have noted that rejecting (AR) entails rejecting,

(Correspondence): For any proposition $\langle P \rangle$, $\langle P \rangle$ is true iff $\langle P \rangle$ stands in a correspondence relation to a fact F.

before asking what traditional theory of truth non-realist cognitivism could adopt to justify claiming it evades ontological objections.²² But, whilst important, these efforts have failed

²² This strategy is pursued by Suikkanen (2017) and Veluwenkamp (2017).

to provide justification for the claim that true irreducibly normative claims incur no ontological commitment and evade ontological objections.

Failing to engage with truthmaker theory has blinded us to the answer to *that* question. Once attended to, we can see that rejecting (AR) may involve *more* than denying (Correspondence). For it can *also* be read as a rejection of certain tenets of standard truthmaker theory. In particular, as a denial of (World-to-Truth) and (Truthmaker Maximalism) and instead an endorsement of,

(Truth-to-World): There are some truths that do not depend upon the world.

(Truthmaker Anti-Maximalism): There are some propositions <P> such that it is false that if <P> is true, then <P> has a truthmaker.

Parfit explicitly tells us which truths he takes to demonstrate the above as we saw in §2: normative, modal, logical, and mathematical truths. These truths are those that *lack* truthmakers, that is, on his view, they do not require *anything* in the world to make them true.²³

The ontological cheating objection, however, *assumes* standard truthmaker theory, including (World-to-Truth) and (Truthmaker Maximalism). So, the non-realist cognitivist can argue that they are not ontologically cheating since, whilst they accept a truthmaking relation and that *some* truths have truthmakers, they *deny* that normative (and some other) claims require the

²³ Some, such as Timothy Williamson (1999; 2013: 391–403), doubt that there are any ‘metaphysically heavyweight’ truthmaking principles like those here discussed which posit a metaphysical truthmaking relation that obtains between truthbearers and truthmakers. I cannot respond to this here (though see Asay & Baron 2019 for a response). But I also don’t have to. For I’m granting truthmaker theory in this metaphysically committed way to non-realist cognitivism to *help* make sense of it. If denied, non-realist cognitivism would remain objectionably unclear since, as I now argue and return to in §4.2., it is in positing such a truthmaking relation whilst denying (Truthmaker Maximalism) that allows for the best articulation of non-realist cognitivism.

existence of any entity in the world to make them true. When it comes to such truths, they may claim, there is *no way* to ontologically cheat.²⁴

Is this response even *prima facie* plausible? Yes, for two reasons. First, in the truthmaking literature, there is fierce debate over (Truthmaker Maximalism)'s plausibility in light of cases where it is unclear either that some truths require truthmakers, or what the truthmakers for some truths could be.²⁵

Such cases include negative existential truths (<Unicorns do not exist>), modal truths (<it is necessary that P>), and truths about the past and future (<Caesar crossed the Rubicon>). Defenders of non-realist cognitivism could appeal to these as *partners-in-innocence*. Insofar as it isn't *obvious* that these claims fail to falsify (Truthmaker Maximalism), this is a *prima facie* promising route for non-realist cognitivism.

Second, there is also debate over whether endorsing (Truthmaker Maximalism) is *necessary* to capture (World-to-Truth).²⁶ For notice the latter claim is ambiguous (Rami 2009: 7–8). It has a generic and a non-generic reading:

(Generic): Truth typically depends upon the world; certain paradigmatic truths depend upon the world.

(Non-Generic): All truths depend upon the world.

²⁴ The non-realist cognitivist must mean 'pure' normative propositions, like <lying is wrong>, lack truthmakers. For as Copp (2018: 588) notes, some logically complex propositions like <lying is wrong because God says so> obviously have ontological implications. By 'normative propositions' I mean 'pure' ones in what follows.

²⁵ See, for example, Armstrong (2004: 53–67, 83–94); Cameron (2008b); Dodd (2007); Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006: 190–191).

²⁶ For an overview, see MacBride (2019: §2.1) and references therein.

Even if one accepts that (Truthmaker Maximalism) is required to explain (World-to-Truth) on the non-generic reading, one might ask why we should read (World-to-Truth) this way. Perhaps it suffices to capture (World-to-Truth) to read it generically whilst endorsing (Truth-to-World) and (Truthmaker Anti-Maximalism) by appeal to principled exceptions of truthmaker-less truths. The availability of this move is another reason why this response is at least *prima facie* plausible.

But there is more. For there are some seemingly intractable questions about the details of non-realist cognitivism that this reading – which takes the theory to posit a truthmaking relation, truthbearers, and truthmakers but deny (Truthmaker Maximalism) – clarifies, making a powerful case that it is the best account of the theory available.

First, it clarifies *how* and *why* non-realist cognitivism can maintain that normative truths have no ontological implications: their truth requires no truthmakers.

It has appeared puzzling how non-realist cognitivism could claim that there are true irreducibly normative claims whilst denying these incur ontological commitment because we have read into it a Quinean theory of ontological commitment:

(Q-Commitment): A theory, T, is ontologically committed to x iff x lies within the domain of the existential quantifiers of the sentences in T.²⁷

²⁷ This greatly oversimplifies Quine's (1948; 1951a; 1969b) view but is sufficient here.

Reading non-realist cognitivism as committed to (Q-Commitment) makes it seem *obviously* confused for Parfit to accept non-realist cognitivism, which quantifies over irreducibly normative phenomena, and then to deny that the theory incurs any ontological commitment to them.

But Parfit nowhere endorses (Q-Commitment). Moreover, his discussion of the senses of ‘exist’ directly engages with Quine and strongly suggests he *rejects* (Q-Commitment) (Parfit 2011: 475–476, Appendix J). To read non-realist cognitivism as *having* to adopt it is an artefact of the prevalence of (Q-Commitment) and its variants in (meta-)ontology and to *assume* that there is no plausible alternative. This assumption is false.²⁸ Given what rejecting (AR) involves, and Parfit’s insistence that his theory lacks ontological commitment, non-realist cognitivism is most charitably understood as endorsing,

(T-Commitment): A theory, T, is ontologically committed to x iff x is something that must exist to make true the propositions expressed in T.²⁹

Accepting (T-Commitment), it is clear how *and* why Parfit thought non-realist cognitivism lacks any ontological commitment to irreducibly normative phenomena: it rejects (Truthmaker Maximalism), takes normative claims to be amongst those not made true by the world, and so, by (T-Commitment), avoids ontological commitment to irreducibly normative phenomena.

This reading also explains why Parfit thought traditional non-naturalists *did* incur commitment to irreducibly normative phenomena. They accept (AR), and so (Truthmaker

²⁸ For an excellent overview of alternatives and their plausibility, see Bricker (2016).

²⁹ For careful discussion and development of such a proposal, see Cameron (2008a; 2019).

Maximalism), and are non-naturalists about normativity. So, they must take non-natural entities in the world to make normative claims true, incurring ontological commitment by (T-Commitment).

Second, Parfit's seemingly mysterious claims that, e.g., normative properties exist only in a 'non-ontological' sense and have 'no ontological status' can be clarified as follows.

On non-realist cognitivism, <there is a reason to avoid suffering> is about, in part, an irreducibly normative property of being a reason. Parfit thinks that this proposition is true whilst not being made true by anything. But he still thinks that the property of being a reason exists *in some sense* he calls 'non-ontological'. This seems to mean,

(Non-Ontological): x exists in a non-ontological sense iff x is what some true proposition not made true by the world is, at least partly, about.

This makes 'non-ontological' existence just a way of speaking, analogous to Parfit's claim that there is a *merely* pleonastic sense of 'property'. That seems to clarify the vexed issue of what he could have meant by saying that normative (and certain other) phenomena have *no* ontological status.

But what is the point of Parfit insisting on the *existence* of irreducibly normative phenomena in this sense? If 'non-ontological' existence is just some manner of speaking about the subject matter of truthmaker-less propositions, why insist on their *existence* at all? Left

unanswered, one might worry this reveals non-realist cognitivism just a notational variant of an error theory.³⁰

In response: negate a claim that something exists in Parfit's 'non-ontological' sense, e.g., \neg <reasons exist in a non-ontological sense>. According to (Non-Ontological), this would mean either a) reasons exist in some ontological sense (i.e., they are entities in the world), b) there are no true claims *about* irreducibly normative reasons, or c) claims about irreducibly normative reasons are *not* true.

Non-realist cognitivism denies a). But it *also* denies b) and c): non-realist cognitivism maintains there are *true* normative claims *about* irreducibly normative reasons (whilst not being made true by anything in the world).³¹ So, Parfit's insistence on the 'existence' of irreducibly normative phenomena in his 'non-ontological' sense is just an insistence upon the non-realist cognitivist commitment to the truth of irreducibly normative claims despite their lacking truthmakers. Concerns of a disguised error theory too, then, are misguided.

Parfit's 'no clear question' view is also clarified. Recall Parfit thinks there is no clear question whether, e.g., mathematical and normative phenomena exist in an 'ontological' sense. (Parfit 2011: 413, 479–480, 481–487; 2017: 60–62, 130–137, 227–229) This sense, he claims, applies only to things that can make propositions true, i.e., entities in the world. But since he

³⁰ Olson (2018: 263–264) raises a similar worry in a different way.

³¹ This is, again, the non-realist cognitivist view about pure normative propositions. For propositions regarding certain natural facts having an irreducibly normative property of being a reason or generating a reason for action, non-realist cognitivism can maintain that truths about the normative status of natural facts themselves do not have truthmakers (because their normative status is determined by pure normative truths which themselves lack truthmakers). Suppose we have reason not to hit someone because doing so would be harmful. Why is being harmful a reason not to hit the person? Because an action's hurting someone is a reason not to do it. The proposition <causing harm is a reason not to do something> would then be, on non-realist cognitivism, a truthmaker-less, pure normative proposition.

thinks that mathematical and normative phenomena can only be understood as the subject matter of some truthmaker-less truths, it is a *category mistake* to ask of their existence in the world.

A third recalcitrant question: why think non-realist cognitivism faces no ontological objections? Not only because, according to non-realist cognitivism, true normative claims lack ontological commitment to anything, but because of what *denying* their truth amounts to *if* they lack truthmakers.

For to deny the truth of a claim that lacks truthmakers is not to deny the existence of *something that makes* them true, but, rather, to deny *that they are* true. Compare what Parfit says about mathematical claims, which he thinks lack truthmakers: to deny $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$, he claims, is not to deny whether there are numbers that make this claim true. Rather, it is to deny the proposition is true.

The same is so, he thinks, of true normative propositions. My reading explains this. Since they are true whilst lacking truthmakers, to deny that they are true cannot be to deny the existence of *what* makes them true but must be to deny *that* they are true. This immediately clarifies Parfit's claims that one need only engage in first-order theorising to answer whether normative claims are true. For the absence of truthmakers for normative propositions means that reflection on the existence and nature of truthmakers cannot play any role in determining whether normative claims are true.³²

³² William FitzPatrick (2018: 55) provides an important alternative reading. Fitzpatrick suggests that Parfit takes normative claims to lack ontological commitment because, Parfit claims, we do not need to settle what exists to settle which first-order normative claims are true. FitzPatrick is effectively suggesting this explains why non-realist cognitivism rejects (Truthmaker Maximalism) and (AR). As my primary aim is not Parfit exegesis, I will not pursue which reading is more faithful to Parfit's text. But I do think we need more to explain why not needing to do ontology to do normative ethics shows that non-realist cognitivism lacks ontological commitment and is not subject to metaphysical or ontological objections. In particular, we need truthmaker theory and a truthmaking account of ontological commitment. With these, I am suggesting that it is a truthmaking account of ontological commitment, rejection of (Truthmaker Maximalism), and taking normative truths to lack truthmakers that explains *both* why true normative claims lack ontological commitment and why one does not need to engage in ontology to ascertain

Fourth, Parfit repeatedly states that, according to non-realist cognitivism, even if there were an empty world (one where nothing existed) it would *still* be true that <nothing exists>, that various claims such as <2+2=4> and <there are reasons to avoid suffering> would be true, and that ‘not even an omnipotent God could have made it false’ that 2+2=4 (Parfit 2011: 485; 2017: 59).

Whilst initially perplexing, these remarks are intelligible if we take non-realist cognitivism to be rejecting (Truthmaker Maximalism) and treating normative and mathematical claims as truthmaker-less truths. For, if, e.g., normative propositions are true without being made true by anything that exists in the world, then what exists is *irrelevant to their truth-value*. This would allow non-realist cognitivism to explain how, even in an empty world, <there are reasons to avoid suffering> is true, since what exists does not affect its truth-value.

Parfit, however, also claims that it is ‘reality that must correspond to these [irreducibly normative] truths’ (Parfit 2011: 59). This might suggest that what exists *does* depend upon, and so is not *irrelevant* to, normative truths. But recall that ‘what exists’ is ambiguous on non-realist cognitivism between ‘what exists in the world’ (‘ontological’ existence) and ‘what exists merely in the sense of being what a truth-maker less truth is partly about’ (‘non-ontological’ existence). On non-realist cognitivism, what exists in the latter sense does depend upon truthmaker-less truths, whilst what exists in the former does not depend upon any truths. Non-realist cognitivism, then, maintains that what exists *in the world* is irrelevant to the truth of truthmaker-less truths, which is consistent with what ‘non-ontologically’ exists depending upon normative truths. My reading

whether normative claims are true. My reading also explains Parfit’s concern that FitzPatrick identifies amongst ‘quietist’ realists for some form of primacy of ethical theorising over metaphysical theorising in meta-ethics.

thus also explains in what sense, on non-realist cognitivism, 'reality' must 'correspond to' or 'depend upon' normative truths.

Fifth, what of the non-realist cognitivist insistence on the non-relativistic truth of true normative propositions? One may suspect that, by denying the existence of non-natural truthmakers for normative propositions, non-realist cognitivism denies itself precisely what other non-naturalists think they *need* to defend the non-relativistic nature of normative truth.

But read as endorsing truthmaking whilst rejecting (Truthmaker Maximalism) we have an explanation. For suppose normative propositions have truthmakers. The question, then, of whether normative propositions are relativistically-true becomes a question about the *nature* of these truthmakers: are they the content of agents' beliefs or preferences, or rather something seemingly objective like natural properties (e.g. *causing harm*) or non-natural properties?

But if normative propositions lack truthmakers, then the question of their relativity cannot be one about the nature of their *truthmakers*. It is vexing what *else* non-realist cognitivism can say about what makes normative truths non-relative. But one thing it *must* say is that their non-relativity is now a *first-order* normative matter: whether normative propositions *are* true non-relativistically can only be settled by asking whether such claims are true and why. And to those claiming the objectivity of normative propositions is a metaphysical question, non-realist cognitivism has a principled response: this fails to acknowledge that normative propositions lack truthmakers.

Sixth, this reading shows how non-realist cognitivism can be motivated in two non-ad hoc ways. First, whilst it's clear Parfit's regular analogies to mathematical, logical, and modal claims are intended to show how non-realist cognitivism is not ad hoc, it has been unclear *why*

Parfit thought this. After all, it is highly contentious how to understand the metaphysics of mathematics, logic, and modality.

But my reading suggests that the import of these analogies is best explained as providing alleged *partners-in-innocence* for a principled endorsement of (Truth-to-World) and (Truthmaker Anti-Maximalism). Moreover, it highlights there are other potential partners-in-innocence well-discussed in the truthmaking literature to motivate such a view.

Second, it suggests another non-ad hoc motivation: that non-realist cognitivism's claims about the metaphysics of normativity (and other domains) are partly consequences of a *more general* meta-metaphysical commitment to standard truthmaker theory minus (Truthmaker Maximalism), accepting (Truth-to-World), (Truthmaker Anti-Maximalism), and (T-Commitment).³³

Finally, this reading reveals how to assess non-realist cognitivism. Namely, we must assess the plausibility of the notion of truthmaking and account of ontological commitment relied upon to explain the theory, the plausibility of rejecting (Truthmaker Maximalism) and claiming that irreducibly normative propositions are truthmaker-less truths, and what positive argument, if any, can be provided for non-realist cognitivism.

Widespread charges of objectionable unclarity against non-realist cognitivism, then, are unfounded. By ignoring truthmaker theory, we have missed what the rejection of (AR) can be best understood as amounting to, the compelling reading of non-realist cognitivism that emerges, and how to assess the view. And if true, non-realist cognitivism is a *deeply* attractive

³³ The foregoing suggests Cowie's (2014) 'locality' constraint on a plausible reading of non-realist cognitivism, where non-realist cognitivism must be appealing to something unique about normativity, misunderstands the theory.

theory: revealing that commitment to true irreducibly normative claims plausibly involves no ontological commitment to normative phenomena and faces no ontological and metaphysical objections. This would show such objections *entirely* confused, and radically undermine a strong motivation for both naturalism and error theory.

I've suggested there is reason to think the above is Parfit's non-realist cognitivism by charitably interpreting his rejection of (AR). If the reader remains unconvinced this is Parfit's theory, then *his* non-realist cognitivism remains obscure. But perhaps it really was so: in which case, I submit the reading above as the best version of non-realist cognitivism *simpliciter*.³⁴

It will be important later to remember that non-realist cognitivism as developed here does not reject *all* of standard truthmaker theory. The account assumes that there is a truthmaking relation, truthmakers, and truthbearers. It only denies (Truthmaker Maximalism) and that the truthmaking relation obtains between true irreducibly normative propositions and any entities. Rejecting standard truthmaker theory *simpliciter* – rejecting a substantive truthmaking relation, truthmakers, and truthbearers – would rob non-realist cognitivism of the crucial contrast between propositions that are made true and those that are not, their account of ontological commitment, and my articulation of their commitments by appeal to truthmaker theory.

³⁴ Admittedly, Parfit (2017: 61-62) provides an alternative formulation of non-realist cognitivism to what I've developed here. Suggesting that there are two senses of 'reality' and 'real', on one he calls the 'ontologically weighty' sense mere possibilia and abstracta are not part of reality. In that sense, Parfit claims non-realist cognitivism accepts 'the natural world is all of reality' and rejects (AR). But on another 'wide' sense, Parfit claims non-realist cognitivism *rejects* the claim that the natural world is all of reality and *accepts* (AR). This is puzzling. First, non-realist cognitivism now looks like a simple refusal to address ontological objections to non-naturalism. Second, it becomes unclear again how normative phenomena are supposed to exist in a 'non-ontological' sense, have 'no ontological status', and how normative claims would be true in an empty world. Finally, any non-question-begging case against accepting that the natural world exhausts reality looks precisely like what traditional non-naturalists offer when acknowledging but resisting the force of metaphysical objections. For these reasons, and since this chapter is not Parfit exegesis, I henceforth bracket this alternative formulation.

I shall now focus upon the positive case for non-realist cognitivism, for three reasons.³⁵ First, to avoid this chapter becoming solely about (Truthmaker Maximalism). Second, because it has been opaque to date how, *even in principle*, to argue for non-realist cognitivism. Third, and most importantly, without a positive argument many will think non-realist cognitivism succeeds in trading in the metaphysical mysteries faced by traditional non-naturalism for what looks like a *further* mystery of how true irreducibly normative propositions could lack truthmakers.³⁶ So, I now ask if non-realist cognitivism can show both that (Truthmaker Maximalism) is false and that irreducibly normative truths lack truthmakers.

§4. From Partners-in-Innocence to a Dilemma

§4.1. Partners-in-Innocence?

A promising strategy to argue for non-realist cognitivism is to appeal to allegedly truthmaker-less truths as partners-in-innocence. If successful, the non-realist cognitivist can argue as follows: some claims of kind K are true and lack truthmakers, such truths are not relevantly disanalogous to normative truths, and so both (Truthmaker Maximalism) is false *and* normative truths lack truthmakers.

For any candidate partner-in-innocence, we should ask: is it independently plausible that such truths lack truthmakers? And, if so, does the best explanation for why they lack truthmakers show that there is no *relevant disanalogy* with normative propositions that prevents the non-realist cognitivist appealing to them?

³⁵ It would be unhelpful to argue over who faces the burden of proof here. Though I suspect many – myself excluded – take non-realist cognitivism radically breaking from meta-ethical orthodoxy to generate the burden of proof.

³⁶ A complete defence of non-realist cognitivism would involve defence of other tenets of truthmaker theory non-realist cognitivism accepts and of (T-Commitment). I grant them here for the sake of argument.

First, consider Parfit's appeal to logical truths like *<modus ponens is valid>*. Such claims, Parfit thinks, lack truthmakers and, hence, any ontological commitment to some logical properties in the world as truthmakers. Even if we charitably assume these claims lack truthmakers, the most plausible explanation for why they might problematise non-realist cognitivists appealing to them.

Take the property of validity. If one thinks that true claims about an argument's validity lack ontological commitment to anything in the world that makes them true, this seems best explained by the *prima facie* plausible thought that the property of validity is *reducible* to something like the relations amongst the contents of the propositions in some argument.³⁷

The problem for non-realist cognitivism is that it explicitly *denies* any such reduction is available for irreducibly normative claims.³⁸ This denial is part of why non-realist cognitivism is a form of non-naturalism about the normative, so it cannot surrender this commitment. Moreover, if it did to force this analogy through, then it threatens collapse into reductive naturalism about normativity.

A second candidate partner-in-innocence is *analytic* truths. Some truthmaker theorists, such as Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, have argued that (Truthmaker Maximalism) should be restricted such that only *synthetic* truths require truthmakers. Presumably the force of this thought is that analytic truths are true in virtue of their *meaning* (where meanings are not reified as entities), whilst synthetic truths seem to make some demand on the world for their truth.

³⁷ At least on the account of ontological commitment I've argued non-realist cognitivism is best read as committed to, with which any appeal non-realist cognitivism makes to partners-in-innocence must be consistent with.

³⁸ See FitzPatrick (2018: 540) for helpful discussion.

The problem here is that, again, even if we grant that analytic truths look like a *prima facie* plausible candidate to falsify (Truthmaker Maximalism), the reason why they seem so is a feature relevantly disanalogous from normative propositions, at least according to non-realist cognitivism.

This is that analytic truths are *analytic*, so true in some way due to their meaning. But non-realist cognitivism takes normative propositions to be *synthetic*. That is, e.g., that <there is a reason to avoid suffering> is not true in virtue of the meaning or content of the words or concepts within it. And, indeed, non-realist cognitivism must say this, since this is partly how they hope to block certain analytic naturalist *reductions* of normative claims to claims about the natural world.

Third, what of common ‘problem cases’ for (Truthmaker Maximalism) in the truthmaking literature like negative existentials and claims about the past and future? Again, these are fiercely contested.³⁹ But even if they lack truthmakers, there are two important disanalogies between these claims and normative propositions that casts strong doubt on this option.

First, what seems initially appealing about negative existentials and past and future propositions lacking truthmakers is that the former are about *things that do not exist*, and the latter about what *did exist* and what *will exist*. But clearly normative propositions, on non-realist cognitivism, are about neither of these things.

³⁹ See MacBride (2019: §2) for discussion.

An objection: isn't there *a* sense in which normative propositions are about things that do not exist, namely, that they are about things that do not exist in the non-realist cognitivist's 'ontological' sense (i.e., as entities in the world)? Is that not enough to secure an analogy with negative existentials to get a partners-in-innocence appeal through?

No. For negative existentials are about more than what does not exist (in the 'ontological' sense). They are *also* about some *lack* or *absence* of something in the world. That, for example, is what some truthmaker maximalists have appealed to in trying to provide plausible truthmakers for them (Rami 2009: 15–16). But normative propositions are in no sense about what the world lacks or has an absence of: they are just true normative propositions not made true by the world.

Second, the best explanation truthmaker theorists typically provide for why negative existentials, and claims about the past and future, lack truthmakers involves preserving the thought that they *do* depend upon the world in a way that the non-realist cognitivist must deny normative propositions do.

To explain: a truth can depend on the world in at least two ways. Take <the rose is red>. This proposition, if true, could depend upon the world in the sense that there is some *thing* in the world (e.g., the particular rose, a trope, the state of affairs *that the rose is red*, or the property *redness* instantiated by the rose) that makes it true.

Another way <the rose is red> may depend on the world is not that it depends on some *thing* in the world but, rather, on *how* the world is. For example, perhaps it is *how* the rose is that is why <the rose is red> is true. But, *prima facie*, how the rose is is not *itself* an entity. This would suggest there are true propositions dependent for their truth not on what exists but rather on

how the world is. This view hopes to allow for truthmaking *without truthmakers*, that is, without *things* that make propositions true by endorsing,

(Truth Supervenes on Being): For every proposition <P>, if <P> is true, then either at least one entity x exists that would not exist if <P> were false, or at least one entity x does not exist that would exist if <P> were not true.⁴⁰

Those convinced negative existentials and propositions about the past and future lack truthmakers have typically suggested that, whilst they do not depend on *what* exists, they *do* depend on *how* the world is: <Unicorns do not exist> and <Caesar crossed the Rubicon> do seem to depend on the world being such that unicorns fail to exist and that past events no longer exist.

Non-realist cognitivism, however, cannot appeal to this way of denying (Truthmaker Maximalism) and taking normative propositions to be amongst the truthmaker-less truths. For, as we've seen, non-realist cognitivism is committed to denying that the truth of irreducibly normative propositions depends *in any way* upon the world, even in the more minimal sense given by (Truth Supervenes on Being).⁴¹

Perhaps one could try salvaging these partners-in-innocence by claiming that 'exists' in (Truth Supervenes on Being) should be read in Parfit's 'non-ontological' sense as I've explained it such that,

⁴⁰ For important discussion and development, see Lewis (2001); Dodd (2002); Hornsby (2005); Melia (2005). See Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006: 190) and references therein for doubts.

⁴¹ Remember, the non-realist cognitivist means 'pure' normative claims like <there is reason to avoid future agony>.

(Truth Supervenes on Being*): For every truthmaker-less proposition <P>, if <P> is true, then either at least one other proposition is false that would have been true if <P> were false, or at least one other proposition is true that would have been false if <P> were false.

But *what* proposition would the non-realist cognitivist be appealing to which would be false if <P> were true, or true if <P> was false? If it is the negation of <P>, then this claim is trivial. And it cannot be a proposition about something that exists in the world, since non-realist cognitivism denies truthmaker-less propositions depend *in any way* on the world. So, it must be some other truthmaker-less claim. But that is just to claim that the truth of a truthmaker-less proposition depends, in part, on the truth-value of other truths about the same subject matter and so is trivial and no help here.

Fourth, another common trouble case for (Truthmaker Maximalism), and candidate partner-in-innocence for non-realist cognitivism which Parfit himself mentions, are *modal* claims. Claims about, e.g., what is *necessary* seem at least *prima facie* plausible candidates for truthmaker-less truths. For, as Peter Simons (2005: 254) says, they seem to be ‘true come (or exist) what may’.

Note that the *kind* of modality is relevant to whether any modal claims constitute a case against (Truthmaker Maximalism). It is contentious what kinds of modality there are. But conceptually and logically necessary truths may plausibly be truthmaker-less. For example, tautologies seem to have their truth settled by the truth-tables of logical constants. Clearly these, however, are not available partners-in-innocence for non-realist cognitivism, since non-realist cognitivism denies that irreducibly normative propositions are logical or conceptual truths.

What of metaphysical and physical modality? This is a vexed question we cannot settle here. Instead, we should ask: *if* they are truthmaker-less, can non-realist cognitivism plausibly claim they are relevantly analogous to true normative propositions to constitute a partner-in-innocence?

The prospects of *this* move are much better than any we've discussed. For non-realist cognitivism maintains true irreducibly, normative propositions are *necessarily* true. This is charitably read, I suggest, as the claim that such propositions are metaphysically necessary. If so, and if normative propositions are necessarily true, then the non-realist cognitivist can *subsume* true normative propositions under all metaphysically necessarily true propositions, which are true whilst lacking truthmakers.⁴²

An objection: suppose <there is an even prime number> is metaphysically necessary. This, and many other, metaphysically necessary claims are about the *existence* and *nature* of entities. But normative claims are about what there is *reason* to do, one *ought* to do, or *should* be the case. Is this not a salient disanalogy?

This is a disanalogy. But the non-realist cognitivist can plausibly respond that it is not a relevant one. For, they may claim, Simons's explanation of why metaphysical necessity claims are truthmaker-less is one that also applies to true, pure normative propositions: they are true or false *regardless* of what exists or what the world is like.⁴³

This partners-in-innocence move does require non-realist cognitivism to take true normative propositions to be metaphysically necessary. But notice that this is a widely-held

⁴² Parfit (2011: 479) appears to suggest Parfit himself may have intended this.

⁴³ This would also explain why Parfit takes mathematical propositions to lack truthmakers: they are, he claims, metaphysically necessary.

assumption by almost every everyone in meta-ethics. So insofar as the success of this move depends on this assumption, it is one that, at least *prima facie*, opponents of non-realist cognitivism likely share.

§4.2. A Dilemma

But there is a problem. For there is good reason to think that the rejection of (Truthmaker Maximalism), whilst still suggesting that some truths have truthmakers, is an unstable position. And, given the dialectical situation the non-realist cognitivist is in here, this worry is *particularly* troubling for them.

As Ross Cameron (2008b: 411–413) and Julian Dodd (2007: 393–395) have argued, if we take the idea of truthmaking seriously, and yet we also allow exceptions to (Truthmaker Maximalism), then it is unclear why this should not motivate a wholesale rejection of truthmaking altogether.

For what could possibly justify a restriction of those truths that have truthmakers without *also* motivating rejecting truthmaking itself? Moreover, one may suspect, as we'll see, that the very motivation behind admitting of truthmaking is that (World-to-Truth) captures an intuition about *truth* and not just the asymmetric dependence of *some* truths on what exists.

If restricting (Truthmaker Maximalism) cannot avoid this worry, then non-realist cognitivism as developed here is troubled. For it faces a dilemma. It would have to either accept (Truthmaker Maximalism) or reject truthmaking altogether.

The first horn would be lethal: non-realist cognitivism cannot accept (Truthmaker Maximalism). If it does, then it accepts that for any proposition, there is some entity in the world

that makes it true. But, first, non-realist cognitivism refuses to admit of the existence of any such entities for normative propositions. So, it would be ontologically cheating. And second and decisively, non-realist cognitivism *explicitly* denies (Truthmaker Maximalism), since it holds that there are some truths that lack truthmakers by endorsing (Truthmaker Anti-Maximalism). So, accepting (Truthmaker Maximalism) would render non-realist cognitivism internally inconsistent.

The second horn would be, if not fatal, a serious blow. My rational reconstruction of non-realist cognitivism by appeal to truthmaker theory has allowed us to clarify the theory, explain why Parfit would have ever thought it had the purported advantages he suggested, and respond to every common objection to it. This rational reconstruction takes non-realist cognitivism to be rejecting (Truthmaker Maximalism).

But it also depends upon non-realist cognitivism *accepting* the rest of standard truthmaker theory, maintaining that there is a substantive truthmaking relation that can obtain between truthbearers and truthmakers. So, if the non-realist cognitivist rejection of (Truthmaker Maximalism) involved a denial that there was a substantive truthmaking relation, truthmakers, and truthbearers, then their view cannot be rationally reconstructed as I've suggested here.

For, first, notice that it does not suffice to clarify the commitments of non-realist cognitivism to note only that it rejects (Truthmaker Maximalism). This is because one can reject (Truthmaker Maximalism) because one denies that there *is* a truthmaking relation, and *not* because one thinks there is this truthmaking relation but that there are certain truthbearers (e.g., normative propositions) that lack truthmakers.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The former is how Williamson (2013: 391–403) rejects (Truthmaker Maximalism). The thought is that (Truthmaker Maximalism) is false because it assumes that there is a metaphysical truthmaking relation that takes truths and entities as relata, and not because no claims are true or because their truth is metaphysically inexplicable.

Second, in rejecting truthmaking, non-realist cognitivism would lose the contrast between those truths that are made true (e.g., empirical propositions) and those that are not (normative, mathematical, logical, and modal), and their truthmaking account of ontological commitment. But, as I argued, these claims are necessary to avail of my explanations of the core commitments of non-realist cognitivism and its alleged avoidance of ontological and metaphysical objections to non-naturalism. Since this reconstruction appears to be the best articulation of the view available, this would be a devastating blow to non-realist cognitivism.⁴⁵

So, can one deny (Truthmaker Maximalism) without also motivating the rejection of truthmaking *tout court*? In particular, can non-realist cognitivism do so?

A first attempt: (World-to-Truth) is ambiguous, that is, the claim that truth depends upon the world has both a generic and non-generic reading. Those who motivate (Truthmaker Maximalism) by appeal to the former claim seem to require reading it as non-generic, i.e., about *all* truths depending on the world.

Non-realist cognitivism could exploit this ambiguity and insist that (World-to-Truth) be read as about certain paradigmatic truths, and that taking only some propositions (e.g., those about the natural world) to be made true suffices to explain this. But defenders of (Truthmaker Maximalism) motivated by capturing (World-to-Truth) can plausibly respond as follows.

⁴⁵ My claim is not that non-realist cognitivism becomes literally unintelligible if it eschews standard truthmaker theory's truthmaking relation. Rather, it is that non-realist cognitivism cannot be reconstructed as I have done so here if it rejects that notion of truthmaking, and since this reconstruction provides the best account of non-realist cognitivism available this would be a serious blow to it. If non-realist cognitivism adopted some deflationary view of the truthmaking relation, then non-realist cognitivism cannot be the view I've developed. For my reconstruction depends upon a substantive understanding of the truthmaking relation which itself provides a substantive contrast between those truthbearers that, when true, stand in that relation and those that do not.

What motivates the non-generic reading of the intuition is that taking *any* truth to depend upon the world seems to be an intuition *about truth*, and not any *particular* truths. That is, that *whatever* truth is it seems in virtue of its nature to be something that depends upon the world. If so, this attempt to deny (Truthmaker Maximalism) being required to best explain (World-to-Truth) fails, and with it this attempt to restrict the class of truthmaker-possessing truths without demotivating truthmaking altogether.

Does the seemingly plausible partner-in-innocence of metaphysically necessary propositions not allow non-realist cognitivism a principled rejection of (Truthmaker Maximalism) that does not motivate rejection of truthmaking altogether?

This is unclear at best. First, it does not do so if the best way to capture (World-to-Truth) is to endorse (Truthmaker Maximalism). Nor will it if the intuition behind the former claim is one *about truth*, such that, necessarily, truths are such that they depend upon what exists in the world.

Second, whilst taking normative propositions, such as pure moral principles, to be metaphysically necessary is a common assumption in meta-ethics, it is much more controversial than many assume. Not only is there an absence of argument for it, but as Kit Fine (2002), Anandi Hattiangadi (2018), and Gideon Rosen (2020) have argued, there is reason to think some motivations for the view (such as thinking the normative strongly supervenes on the non-normative with metaphysical necessity) are misguided.

I cannot settle these issues here. But the relevant point for us is this: subsuming normative propositions into the class of metaphysically necessary propositions, to run this

response, *relies* upon the falsity of recent strong doubts over the metaphysical necessity of normative propositions. This is a further worry for this response.

Third, even if the above two worries are misguided, further details are needed about precisely why metaphysical necessity claims being true ‘come what may’ makes it plausible that they lack truthmakers. Such reasons, however, are scarce in the truthmaking literature itself. I’ve only suggested that *if* this claim can be unpacked to justify a restriction on (Truthmaker Maximalism), then the non-realist cognitivist can appeal to it as a partner-in-innocence to justify claiming true normative propositions lack truthmakers. But much more needs to be said for this slogan to actually justify such a restriction, and to show that in doing so it does not demotivate truthmaking *tout court*.

Finally, perhaps non-realist cognitivism can adopt some theory of truth that would justify rejecting (Truthmaker Maximalism) without casting doubt upon the idea of a truthmaking relation. Such a theory might try to explain, by appeal to *what truth is*, why some truths have truthmakers whilst others do not.

Such a theory would have to adopt *truth pluralism*, the view that there are at least two truth properties. If not, then appeal to what truth is alone would not explain why some truths have truthmakers and others do not. This is because what it would amount to for something to be true would be the same for *any* proposition: but if so, how could appeal to a theory of truth explain why some truths have truthmakers and others do not?

Adopting truth pluralism, the non-realist cognitivist could argue as follows. Perhaps the correspondence theory of truth is true of those propositions concerning the natural world, whilst some other theory of truth is correct for propositions about, e.g., abstract objects, possibilia,

and/or the normative. This, one may think, would explain why the former are made true by something in the world, whilst the latter are not.

Truth pluralism is deeply contentious.⁴⁶ But even if we granted truth pluralism, we must ask what theory of truth non-realist cognitivism could consistently adopt to justify this rejection of (Truthmaker Maximalism). Jussi Suikkanen has, however, argued that coherentist, pragmatist, epistemic, and deflationist theories are unavailable to non-realist cognitivism as accounts of normative truth, forcing primitivism onto non-realist cognitivism (Suikkanen 2017: 199–202).⁴⁷

I'll now suggest, *pace* Suikkanen, that non-realist cognitivism *can* adopt a form of truth pluralism that accepts deflationism for normative truths, that this is the most promising way to escape my dilemma, and end by noting some doubts over its success.

Coherentism and pragmatism are unavailable, Suikkanen argues, since they entail first-order relativism about normative propositions by respectively making them true relative to either being a member of a maximally coherent set of beliefs or being instrumentally valuable. Epistemic theories are unavailable as they posit an epistemic normative notion, such as super-assertibility, to explain what truth is which forces a trilemma on non-realist cognitivism. The trilemma is seen by asking how non-realist cognitivism can explain the aforementioned normative notion. Suikkanen argues it reveals three fatal options: appealing to some other meta-ethical theory (rendering it unable to capture epistemic normativity and facing whatever objections it takes that other theory to face), appealing to another theory of truth (which, Suikkanen argues, is not an option), or provides another epistemic account of the normative notion in question (generating an infinite regress).

⁴⁶ For a defence, see Edwards (2018).

⁴⁷ Mintz-Woo (2018: 719–720) also addresses Suikkanen's arguments and argues against thinking the non-realist cognitivist adopting truth pluralism alone would vindicate their view.

Granting Suikkanen's case against deflationism momentarily, this would leave primitivism about truth, the view that a proposition's truth consists in its possessing some unanalysable property of truth. And the fatal problem for our purposes is that if non-realist cognitivism must endorse primitivism about truth for normative propositions, then it has no answer as to why, if such claims lack truthmakers, this does not demotivate talk of truthmaking altogether – since this theory is *silent* on anything about the nature of the truth property enjoyed by true normative propositions.

Now, Suikkanen argues that if non-realist cognitivism accepted deflationism, we can ask if it accepts deflationism or inflationism about *facts*. Accepting the former might seem to render non-realist cognitivism indistinguishable from non-naturalist normative realism. Recall that non-realist cognitivism insists that non-naturalist normative realism should be rejected because it posits worldly normative facts as truthmakers for normative propositions, denying that 'it is a fact that suffering is bad' is just another way to state 'suffering is bad'. But if *all* facts are understood deflationarily, then this insistence by non-realist cognitivism becomes very hard to understand. For such a rejection of non-naturalist normative realism *presupposes* an *inflationary*, ontologically committal notion of facthood. Deflationism about facts, however, eliminates the distinction between ontologically and non-ontologically committing notions of facts, making *all* facts non-ontologically committing restatements of the contents of true propositions. If non-realist cognitivism accepted deflationism about facts, this crucial contrast between notions of facts is lost, leaving it unable to articulate the above distinction between itself and non-naturalist normative realism.

Additionally, non-realist cognitivism cannot distinguish itself from non-naturalist normative realism by insisting that the former denies but the latter accepts that these deflated

normative facts are truthmakers for normative propositions. For recall that truthmakers are supposed to be entities the admittance of which is an *ontological commitment* (this is partly why non-realist cognitivism wants to avoid them). Deflationism about facts entails that *all* facts are non-ontologically committing ways of describing reality and so are ineligible to be truthmakers. Since deflationism about facts eliminates facts as candidate truthmakers, by making all facts *non-ontologically committing* ways of describing reality, non-naturalist normative realism and non-realist cognitivism cannot be distinguished by appeal to competing truthmaking claims involving deflated facts.⁴⁸

To distinguish itself from more traditional non-naturalism, Suikkanen suggests that non-realist cognitivism could instead accept inflationism about facts whilst maintaining that there are no such inflationary normative facts. This, Suikkanen claims, seem to make non-realist cognitivism a form of normative error theory. For whilst deflationism allows the non-realist cognitivist to predicate truth to normative propositions, if fact inflationism is true and non-realist cognitivism denies there are inflationary normative facts, then it denies there are *any* normative facts – and that sounds like an error theory. So, deflationism about truth appears unavailable to non-realist cognitivism.

There is, however, a way out of Suikkanen’s dilemma. This is by, first, recognising that we are granting non-realist cognitivism truth *pluralism* whilst Suikkanen’s dilemma assumes truth *monism*. Second, non-realist cognitivism could adopt pluralism *about facts*. On this view, non-realist cognitivism accepts correspondence for truths that are made true, deflationism for those

⁴⁸ That non-naturalist realism accepts correspondence for normative truths and non-realist cognitivism does not won’t suffice to enable non-realist cognitivism to distinguish itself from non-naturalist realism. Because if it did, then it would allow non-realist cognitivism to claim that normative truths lack truthmakers whilst claiming that non-naturalist realism accepts that they do. And on deflationism about facts, non-realist cognitivism cannot make sense of that claim. For deflationary normative facts are ineligible to be truthmakers (they are not worldly entities that could make normative propositions true but just restatements of the content of true propositions). So, commitment to deflationism about all facts would collapse the distinction non-realist cognitivism draws between itself and non-naturalist realism.

that are not, and that there are two notions of a fact: an *inflationary*, ontologically committing notion that concerns worldly entities that can serve as candidate truth-makers, and a *deflationary*, non-ontologically committing notion concerning mere restatements of the content of true propositions.

With truth and fact pluralism, non-realist cognitivism can articulate the distinction between it and traditional non-naturalism whilst also avoiding becoming an error theory. For if there are *both* inflationary and deflationary notions of fact-hood, the distinction between ontologically and non-ontologically committing facts – collapsed by *monist* deflationism about facts – is saved. Non-realist cognitivism can then claim that non-naturalist normative realism is the view that normative facts are inflationary facts that serve as truth-makers of normative truths, whereas non-realist cognitivism denies that there are such inflationary normative facts (so no normative truthmakers) and that there are only deflationary normative facts. This avoids non-realist cognitivism becoming an error theory too, since, assuming fact pluralism, not all facts are inflationary and so accepting only deflationary normative facts avoids being a denial that there are *any* normative facts.

If plausible, this form of non-realist cognitivism would escape my dilemma. But it faces three challenges. First, why think that deflationism about truth entails that a given truth lacks a truthmaker? Deflationism entails that truth is exhausted by something like: $\langle P \rangle$ is true iff P. But why should that entail that $\langle P \rangle$ cannot be made true? Appeal to correspondence being correct for other truths is no help: correspondence may be a sufficient condition for being made true, but why assume it is necessary? This is especially difficult assuming – as we are in the non-realist

cognitivists favour – that deflationism and truthmaker theory are compatible. Absent an answer, deflationism about truth may fail to justify thinking normative truths lack truthmakers at all.⁴⁹

Second, even if being deflationarily-true entails that a given truth lacks a truthmaker, why should we think that normative truths are candidates for truth only in the deflationary sense? On monist theories of truth, such a question is easily answered: all truths are true in the *only* sense of truth. But pluralist theories must explain why certain truths are candidates for truth in *only one* sense of truth. If the non-realist cognitivist cannot do this, then appeal to truth pluralism will not justify a relevant restriction, since normative truths might be candidates for truth in, e.g., the correspondence (and thus truthmaking) sense.

Third, can non-realist cognitivism justify adopting these brands of truth and fact pluralism in the first place? This is unclear at best; both are highly controversial, and their defence is no trivial task. If the only justification the non-realist cognitivist offers for adopting them is to avoid metaphysical objections to non-naturalism and my dilemma, then non-realist cognitivism may do so at the cost of a different kind of ontological cheating: ad hoc moves to avoid pressing objections.

These concerns provide reason to doubt non-realist cognitivism will succeed in showing that these pluralisms justify rejecting (Truthmaker Maximalism) without demotivating truthmaking *simpliciter*, or in motivating such pluralism at all. I cannot settle whether they are fatal here. I can, however, conclude that non-realist cognitivism *must* show that such concerns are misguided. For if it cannot, then either it avoids my dilemma only to face further troubling

⁴⁹ Deflationary normative facts would be ineligible to be truthmakers. Does that not show, assuming deflationism for normative truths, that normative propositions can be deflationarily-true whilst lacking truthmakers? No. For we might instead think that if normative propositions all lack truthmakers, then they are all false *because* they lack truthmakers, instead of thinking normative propositions can be deflationarily-true without truthmakers. Non-realist cognitivism thus requires an *argument* to establish the latter.

objections, or it is impaled upon the dilemma of accepting (Truthmaker Maximalism) or rejecting truthmaking *simpliciter*. The former horn would leave non-realist cognitivism both guilty of ontological cheating and internally inconsistent. The latter would rob non-realist cognitivism of the clarity, and explanation of its alleged strengths, that truthmaker theory provided – plunging it back into unclarity’s abyss.

§5. Conclusion

I have provided the clearest and most compelling account of non-realist cognitivism to date, clarified the otherwise-opaque dialectic between non-realist cognitivism and its opponents, and provided a novel ontological cheating objection to the theory. Consideration of that objection resulted in an argument that casts doubt upon whether non-realist cognitivism can reject (Truthmaker Maximalism) without demotivating truthmaking *simpliciter*. Appealing to truth and fact pluralism to justify restricting (Truthmaker Maximalism) does provide a promising way out of my dilemma for non-realist cognitivism. But I’ve argued the final success of this move remains to be seen. An important concern for future work on non-realist cognitivism, then, should be to explore this and other responses to my dilemma that hope to show how one could justify claiming normative truths lack truthmakers without demotivating truthmaking altogether.

I conclude with three positive consequences of the foregoing for the metaphysics of normativity, truthmaking, and their radically underexplored relationship.

First, as this discussion of non-realist cognitivism makes clear, truthmaker theory has gone almost completely ignored in contemporary meta-ethics and, more generally, in the

metaphysics of normativity.⁵⁰ Curiously, normative claims have *also* been ignored in the truthmaking literature itself.

Attention to truthmaking may generate interesting novel views like non-realist cognitivism, provide new ways to attempt to further meta-normative debate, and enrich the truthmaking literature itself. Given the sophisticated development of truthmaker theory in metaphysics, even if there are those sceptical of truthmaking in meta-ethics, it would be an important addition to meta-normative theorising for these doubts and their implications to be explored in this context.

Second, and more generally, inattentiveness to meta-metaphysical questions – such as whether there is a truthmaking relation, and whether to accept truthmaking-based accounts of notions such as ontological commitment – can render us blind to novel views in first-order metaphysics. This is what I have suggested has occurred in the case of non-realist cognitivism. In doing so, I've begun highlighting strong reason to rectify the general lack of meta-metaphysical reflection within normative metaphysics. It is curious, for example, that many meta-ethicists seem to assume a Quinean theory of ontological commitment without comment. Given the objections it faces and the sophisticated alternatives available, this should give us pause and motivate reflection on how this and other unargued meta-metaphysical assumptions have shaped meta-ethical debate. Amongst other things, being sensitive to how meta-metaphysical issues interact with first-order metaphysical questions about normativity can help us better understand how we could answer the latter in tangible ways, as my account of non-realist cognitivism demonstrates.

⁵⁰ Exceptions include Asay (2013) and Byerly (2018).

Third, if truthmaking *is* plausible, there are interesting and deeply neglected questions to address regarding truthmaking in meta-ethics. Two highlighted here are these. If (Truthmaker Maximalism) is true, then: what *are* the truthmakers for normative propositions? Jamin Asay (2013: 221–222) suggests that meta-ethicists have been making implicit truthmaking claims without realising it; one might read, e.g., naturalists and non-naturalists as offering competing truthmakers for normative propositions. But even if so, given our best accounts of truthmaking, are these plausible claims about *truthmaking*? And, if (Truthmaker Maximalism) is false, and its falsity does not demotivate truthmaking altogether, then, with the non-realist cognitivist, we should ask: do true normative propositions *lack* truthmakers?

Chapter 2

Non-Realist Cognitivism, Necessity, and Triviality

§1. Introduction

In Chapter 1, I argued that non-realist cognitivism is best understood as the view that (pure) normative truths lack truthmakers. This, I argued, requires the non-realist cognitivist to adopt standard truthmaker theory, reject truthmaker maximalism, and adopt a truthmaking-based account of ontological commitment.

The primary challenge the view faces is justifying its adoption of standard truthmaker theory whilst rejecting truthmaker maximalism. If it cannot, then either it accepts truthmaker maximalism and both ontologically cheats whilst becoming inconsistent, or it must reject truthmaker theory altogether and the clarification of non-realist cognitivism I provided with it.

There are, at least, three ways to meet the challenge: argue that the apparent motivation for truthmaker theory can be met by their brand of truthmaker anti-maximalism, that some candidate partner-in-innocence helps justify truthmaker anti-maximalism, or argue that some theory of truth justifies their anti-maximalism. I suggested that the last option seemed most promising but argued that it still faces difficult challenges.

In this chapter, I explore the second option more carefully. I argue that non-realist cognitivism can be developed into a view I call *normative trivialism*. Normative trivialism is inspired by the mathematical trivialism of Agustín Rayo and Ross Cameron. Trivialism about some domain is the view that ‘the truth of the true sentences in that domain makes no demands on the

world: the world just doesn't have to do anything to make it the case that these truths are true' (Cameron 2010: 408).

Normative trivialism argues that normative truths do not require or demand the existence of normative properties, or anything else. So, they demand nothing of the world and are trivially true in the sense that no conditions must be met by the world for them to be true. This theory, I argue, promises all the benefits of non-realist cognitivism *and* a significant advantage over many other meta-ethical theories: it explains the *necessity* of necessary normative truths.

I proceed as follows. In §2 I introduce mathematical trivialism and the account of necessary truths Cameron employs to defend it. In §3, I argue that normative trivialism preserves the strengths of non-realist cognitivism, offers a principled rejection of truthmaker maximalism, and generates an explanation for the necessity of necessary normative truths. I defend the view against three objections in §4. I conclude in §5.

§2. The Necessary as Trivial: Mathematical Trivialism

If necessary truths are truthmaker-less, and if (pure) normative truths are necessary, then non-realist cognitivism can maintain that truthmaker maximalism is false and *all* necessary truths – including normative truths – lack truthmakers. As we saw, necessary truths lacking truthmakers seems *prima facie* plausible since they look true 'come what may', that is, in some sense regardless of what the world is like.

But why should we think that necessary truths being true 'come what may' suggests that they lack truthmakers? A slogan justifies nothing. Moreover, even if some necessary truths like normative truths lack truthmakers, we might still worry why these claims are *necessary* or *true* once

one has severed their truth from the world, since we are unable to point to anything that exists to help settle these questions.

There is, however, more than a slogan here. An account of the nature of necessary truths that would justify the truthmaker anti-maximalism of non-realist cognitivism is available. Whilst controversial, it has several independently attractive features. An overall abductive case for it is strengthened by recognising what it offers in the meta-ethical case. This account is developed by Ross Cameron (2010) and inspired by the mathematical trivialism of Agustín Rayo (2009, 2013).

Rayo (2009) distinguishes between the Platonist, non-Platonist, committalist, and non-committalist. The first thinks that there are numbers and the second denies this. The third thinks that the truth of mathematical claims demands the existence of numbers, the fourth denies this.

This provides a four-fold taxonomy: Platonist committalists who think that some mathematical claims are true and so numbers exist, the non-Platonist non-committalist who thinks that there aren't any numbers but that this does not entail that there are no mathematical truths. The non-Platonist committalist (or error theorist) thinks that there are no numbers and so mathematical claims are not true. The Platonist non-committalist thinks that there are numbers but that they are irrelevant to the truth of mathematical propositions.

Cameron (2010: 404–405) argues that this taxonomy requires revision because it ignores whether committalists or non-committalists think that anything other than the existence of numbers is demanded by the truth of mathematical claims. This gives us two further distinctions.

First, the *conservative* committalist believes that the existence of numbers is sufficient for the truth of mathematics (such that they take the debate over mathematical truth to be settled by

the Platonism/non-Platonism debate). The *non-conservative* committalist thinks that something *in addition to* the existence of numbers is required for the truth of mathematical truths (making Platonism necessary but not sufficient for mathematical truth).

Second, the *demanding* non-committalist thinks that, whilst the existence of numbers is not demanded by any mathematical claims, their truth does require the existence of *something*, perhaps the possible existence of numbers, or the existence of infinitely many concrete objects. The *non-demanding* non-committalist thinks that *nothing* is demanded of the world for true mathematical claims to be true.

The mathematical trivialist is a non-demanding non-committalist. They believe that ‘the truth of any mathematical claim does not demand the existence of numbers, and it does not demand anything else, hence it does not demand anything at all; mathematical claims are trivially true, in the sense that they have trivial truth conditions—no conditions have to be met by the world in order for them to be true’ (Cameron 2010: 405).

Four clarifications. First, following Cameron (2010: 407–408), when claiming that ‘the truth of p demands or requires the existence of x ’ I am employing a non-modal, fine-grained notion of demand or requirement. This is for three reasons. First, a modal necessitation reading would entail that everything which necessarily exists is an ontological commitment of every sentence. For no claim can be true without the existence of all necessary existents, but it is *prima facie* implausible to suggest that, for example, ‘Mike likes chess’ demands of the world that there be numbers. Second, a mere entailment account of ‘demand’ would rule out trivialism as a conceptual possibility, since every sentence demands (or ‘entails’) that each and every necessary truth is true, and I think trivialism is a conceptual possibility (even if false). Third, a range of other conceptual possibilities are written off as conceptually confused on a modal reading of

‘demand’ and ‘requirement’, such as being able to make sense of the claim that the truth of ‘Socrates exists’ does not demand the existence of Socrates’s singleton.⁵¹ A fine-grained, non-modal notion avoids such problems and allows for the conceptual possibility of some claims whose truth makes no ‘demand on how the world is’ (Cameron 2010: 408).⁵²

Second, by ‘trivial truth’, I mean some claim that is both true and whose truth makes no demand on the world for its truth (for example, it does not require truthmakers). I do not mean that the truth in question is *obvious, uninteresting, entailed by everything or anything*, or any other sense of ‘trivial’ that make such truths unimportant or unworthy of philosophical debate.

Third, mathematical trivialism concerns the truths of *pure* mathematics.⁵³ Some mathematical truths, like ‘the number of philosophy books in the Bodleian is greater than the number of self-help books’, make obvious demands on the world: that there be more philosophy books in the Bodleian than self-help books. The trivialist claims that this truth does not, however, require the existence of *numbers* (or any other controversial mathematical entity).

Fourth, mathematical trivialism is *not* the view that the truth-conditions of mathematical truths are necessarily met, by, for example, its being the case that mathematical truths require the existence of numbers and that numbers exist in all worlds. Such a view suggests that these truths make demands on the world for their truth but that such demands are necessarily met. Instead, it is that mathematical truths make no demand *whatsoever* on the world.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Cameron (2010: 407–408) for a longer list of such written off conceptual possibilities.

⁵² I am intentionally silent on the details of this fine-grained, non-modal notion. By leaving it open how best to precisify it, I am illustrating that what can be said in favour of the view of necessary truths that Cameron defends – and I suggest non-realist cognitivism adopt – does not presuppose truthmaker theory. I return to this matter in §3.

⁵³ Henceforth, I use ‘mathematical truth/claim’ to refer to ‘pure’ mathematical truths and claims.

⁵⁴ Relatedly, trivialism is not relying upon some result in the ‘ontological free lunches’ debate in the grounding and truthmaking literatures. That debate, commonly associated with David Armstrong (1997), concerns thinking that if certain truths obtain and particular entities exist, then you get certain other truths and entities ‘for free’ if they are grounded in or made true by others (see Schulte 2014 for discussion). Trivialists about x , instead, take the truth of x -claims to make *no* demand on the world *at all*.

Now, we are looking for a reason to believe that necessary truths lack truthmakers if they are true ‘come what may’, which does not demotivate accepting that there is a truthmaking relation. If this can be done, then non-realist cognitivism can escape my dilemma – which arises because it denies truthmaker maximalism whilst insisting there is a truthmaking relation – by plausibly suggesting that (pure) normative truths are necessary truths and lack truthmakers for the same reason any other necessary truth does. If this justification provides no reason to deny that there is a truthmaking relation that obtains between contingent truths and what exists, then they will have escaped the dilemma.

If reflection on mathematical trivialism can provide the justification sought, then the question to ask is *why* they maintain that mathematical truths, as necessary truths, allegedly make no demand on the world for their truth. Or, why, as the theological metaphor popular here and invoked by Cameron puts it, that ‘if God is making the world, He doesn’t have to do anything to make true the true claims of mathematics—they will be true trivially, come what may’ (Cameron 2010: 408).

Cameron’s answer is that we should accept,

(Necessary as Trivial) A proposition p is necessary if and only if p is trivially true (it makes no demand on the world for its truth); all necessary truths are trivial truths.

This view is the conjunction of, first, a view that entails that if a truth is a trivial truth, then it is a necessary truth,

(Substantiality of Contingency) ‘Trivialism is false of the entire domain of contingent truths. That is, any true sentence whose truth does not make a demand on the world could not have been false.’ (Cameron 2010: 412)

Or: if any sentence is true and does not make a demand on the world, then it is not the case that it could have been false (that is, it is necessary). This entails, via contraposition, that if a sentence is not necessary (i.e., is contingent), then that sentence does make a demand on the world.⁵⁵

One might think it obvious that necessity follows from a claim’s not making any demand on the world (that is, from its triviality). But this is too quick. A claim’s being trivially true means that it is true and its truth makes no demand on the world. This, in principle, allows that the sentence could have been false and that its falsity would, were it false, have placed no demand on the world. Moreover, one might just think that *every* true claim demands at least that the claim not be false, though if this were so then, of course, trivialism of any form is hopeless.

No inconsistency, Cameron grants, lies in thinking that some trivially true sentence is contingently true. Still, Cameron argues that we should reject contingently true trivial truths because, if there were such truths, their truth-value would be *brute*, that is, ungrounded. Cameron argues that, from a very weak principle about the relationship between truths and reality, we can conclude that triviality implies necessity, lest we think this plausible principle violated:

⁵⁵ With Cameron (2010: 409), I assume that the demands of a sentence do not vary from world to world. For it seems implausible that an actually true sentence which means what it does and makes some demand on the world could then impose a different demand on the world from that which it actually does. In this sense, meaning fixes truth-conditions and truth-conditions fix the demands of some claim. This is a simplifying assumption and does not stack the deck in my favour.

(Weak Truth-to-World) There cannot be a difference in the truth-value of a sentence across worlds without some difference in the conditions of the worlds that explains the corresponding difference in value.⁵⁶

This principle is weaker than any other thesis regarding the relationship between truths and worlds than we have seen so far. For the principle does not assume truthmaker theory, and so also does not assume that truthmakers are what grounds and explains the relevant truths. It is also consistent with the non-realist cognitivist insistence that various truthmaker-less truths would still be true in an empty world if those truths are necessary, since necessary truths do not have their truth-value vary across worlds.

So, the thought behind (Weak Truth-to-World) is that variation of truth-value of a claim across worlds must depend upon, and be explained by, something within those worlds, and not some mere difference in truth-value of sentences. But if there is anything that the truth-value of some claim, *C*, appears sensitive to, then this suggests that those things to which it is sensitive are relevant to the conditions under which *C* is true. If so, then the truth of *C* seems to make a demand on the world – that those conditions obtain.

The trivial truths, however, are those that *lack* any such world-sensitive truth-conditions. They are those truths that do not require any condition of a world to be met because their truth does not demand anything of the world. If we have contingent trivial truths, then, this would allow for differences in truth-values across worlds that had nothing to do with what those worlds are like (what exists in them, their properties, or any other feature). This violates (Weak Truth-to-World). We might conclude that there are brute, ungrounded contingent facts. This is a very

⁵⁶ This difference cannot merely be the difference in the truth-value of some claim across worlds, lest we return to the unhelpful claim that every sentence demands that that sentence be true.

high cost. Instead, Cameron concludes that triviality implies necessity and trivialism is false of all contingent truths. This preserves (Weak Truth-to-World), keeping contingent truths grounded in something about the worlds in which they are true.

(Substantiality of Contingency), Cameron argues, motivates accepting this second claim, which entails that if some claim is necessary, then it is trivial:

(Triviality of Necessity) ‘Trivialism is true of the entire domain of the necessary truths. That is, any true sentence whose truth makes a demand of the world could have been false.’ (Cameron 2010: 409)

To see why, notice that, for any necessary truth, we might ask *why* that truth is necessary. Cameron argues that it is a desideratum of a theory of necessary truths that its explanation for why those claims are true allows us to infer an explanation for *why they are necessary*: ‘When S is necessary, I want an account of the truth of S that will allow me to *infer* that S is necessary, and explain why it is so, from knowing why S is true’ (Cameron 2010: 401).

A theory that fails to do this is Lewis’s modal realism (Cameron 2010: 402). The truth of a sentence, on Lewis’s view, depends upon what happens at the actual world, and the necessity of a sentence depends upon what happens at every world. It is true that there are elephants at the actual world because they co-habit this world. But this entails or suggests nothing about whether it is necessary. To learn *that* I have to discover whether every possible object co-habits a world with at least one elephant. Even if it was necessary that there are elephants, Lewis’s theory divorces the necessity of that claim from its truth, such that its truth does not allow us to infer any explanation for its necessity.

Moreover, as Michael Jubien (2007) has argued, suppose ‘All the As are Bs’ is necessary. The reason why would consist in some reason to think that ‘All the As are Bs’ *must* hold across all worlds. On Lewis’s view, ‘All As are Bs’ is necessarily true when true at every possible world. But this seems to divorce the reason why the relevant claim is necessary from the truth of that claim at each world, because Lewis’ answer to why the claim is necessary ‘doesn’t tell us what forces it to be true in each of [the worlds], in other words, what its necessity consists in’ (Jubien 2017: 104–105). If the reasons why ‘All the As are Bs’ is true has nothing to do with why it must hold across all worlds, then Jubien’s modal irrelevance objection seems to suggest that if the reason why some claim is true does not explain its necessity, then that view will struggle to explain why that claim is necessary in the first place (Cameron 2010: 402).

Now if (Substantiality of Contingency) is true and all trivial truths are necessary, then, Cameron argues, we have a strong reason to accept (Triviality of Necessity). For the former allows us to explain the necessity of all necessary claims, and, he argues, if there are some necessary truths that are not trivial then their necessity would go unexplained.

The reason Cameron thinks non-trivial necessary truths would generate unexplained necessities can be stated as a dilemma. Suppose ‘there is an even prime number’ is a non-trivial necessary truth because it demands of the world that numbers exist and suppose they exist necessarily. Invoking the necessary existence of numbers does not explain the necessity of our original claim. It merely invokes another necessity, but what makes it necessary that the demands that ‘there is an even prime number’ makes are met? Taking ‘2 exists’, for example, to be another necessary truth that explains why ‘there is an even prime number’ is true requires ‘2 exists’ not be trivial either, since otherwise ‘2 exists’ would not make any demands on the world: more generally, if it is necessary that C’s demands are met, then the claim, D, that C’s demands are met must itself make demands that are necessarily met (Cameron 2010: 412).

The dilemma: what explains why D is necessary? Either we continue to cite further necessities and threaten a vicious regress, or we maintain that the necessity of some claims is brute. These, whilst options, are unattractive, since vicious regresses threaten to leave what we began with unexplained and, *prima facie*, the positing of brute facts is a heavy theoretical cost absent some very good reason for doing so.

But *if* we accept (Triviality of Necessity) we have a way out of generating this dilemma in the first place: all necessary truths are trivially true, so they make no demands on the world for their truth. We can then explain the necessity of all necessary truths without invoking any non-trivial necessities. For, crucially, we can now infer from the reason why some claim is true – that it is trivially so – to its necessity, for (Necessary as Trivial) entails that a claim is necessary if and only if it is trivial, meeting the desideratum Cameron identified earlier.

§3. Non-Realist Cognitivism as Normative Trivialism

We are looking for a reason to believe that necessary truths lack truthmakers if they are true ‘come what may’, which might then be appealed to by non-realist cognitivism to argue that truthmaker maximalism is false but that there is plausibly still a truthmaking relation. If (Necessary as Trivial) is true, then it offers an explanation of why some truths have truthmakers and others do not which arguably does not demotivate truthmaking altogether.

One way of understanding a claim making a ‘demand on the world’ for its truth is that the truth of that claim requires a truthmaker – that is, some extant *thing* to make it true. Contingent truths, being non-trivial, make some demand on the world. The truthmaker theorist suggests this be understood as contingent truths requiring truthmakers. Necessary truths,

contrastingly, being trivially true, make *no* demand on the world. The truthmaker theorist can understand this as necessary truths not requiring truthmakers for their truth.

According to non-realist cognitivism, pure normative truths are metaphysically necessary truths. Assuming (Necessity as Trivial), like any other necessary truth, normative truths are trivially true, that is, they make no demands on the world. Given their acceptance of truthmaker theory (minus truthmaker maximalism), this means that normative and all other necessary truths lack truthmakers and they do so *because* they make no demand on the world for their truth.

Why does this not demotivate truthmaking altogether? Because given the trivial/non-trivial truth distinction and (Necessity as Trivial), we have an explanation, not only for why normative truths and other necessary truths lack truthmakers, but also why all contingent truths *do* have truthmakers. For contingent truths all make some demands on the world for their truth, whilst necessary truths do not. Interpreting *demands* as *truthmakers* allows non-realist cognitivism to provide a principled reason to reject truthmaker maximalism without demotivating truthmaking altogether: whether a claim requires truthmakers is explained by whether that type of claim *makes any demand on the world*. Those that do, contingent truths, need to stand in a truthmaking relation to what they demand of the world; those that do not, necessary truths, are not made true by anything.

What of the worry that a motivation for truthmaker theory is thinking that the nature of truth is such that whatever is true somehow depends upon the world for being true? The non-realist cognitivist might instead suggest that a different general motivation for truthmaker theory is that it provides the best way of understanding what it means for some claims to make a demand on the world for their truth.

But they may also suggest that this intuition about the nature of truth itself is fully captured by (Weak Truth-to-World). Namely, that there cannot be a difference in the truth-value of a sentence across worlds without some difference in the conditions of the worlds that explains the corresponding difference in value. One reason why this is particularly promising as a way of understanding the relevant intuition is that it does not *presuppose* truthmaker theory, that is, that we must capture the kind of dependence in question by positing a truthmaking relation. And now the non-realist cognitivist can suggest that they fully respect (Weak Truth-to-World), since the theory does not posit *any* truths that have their truth-value vary across worlds without a difference in those worlds. Contingent truths all depend upon what exists to be true whilst necessary truths are all trivially true and so are true (or false) in all the same worlds.

Call the conjunction of non-realist cognitivism and (Necessary as Trivial) *normative trivialism*. Like mathematical trivialism, it suggests that pure normative truths make no demands on the world and understands this as the claim that normative and other necessary truths lack truthmakers (and not that such truths make demands on the world, or have truthmakers, that necessarily exist). Non-realist cognitivism as normative trivialism enjoys the strengths we previously noted: consistency with naturalism more generally, a response to every common objection to non-realist cognitivism, avoidance of parsimony and queerness objections, and appeal to a non-ad hoc general meta-metaphysical view, namely, now, truthmaker theory in conjunction with a view of the nature of necessary truths.

But it enjoys further benefits too. First, it avoids the ontological cheating objection by providing a principled distinction between those truths that are made true and those that are not – including the normative truths amongst the truthmaker-less truths – without demotivating the rest of standard truthmaker theory employed to make sense of the view. Second, it can employ the partners-in-innocence style argument for the view I offered in Chapter 1. Third, even if non-

realist cognitivism ended up adopting truth and fact pluralism for other reasons, those views are no longer doing the work of justifying a denial of truthmaker maximalism. This is good news since, as I argued, it is unclear at best that they can do this.

A final attractive feature, however, deserves note. Non-realist cognitivism can now offer the ever-elusive explanation for *why* (pure) normative propositions are metaphysically necessary. And it can do this whilst meeting the independent desideratum for accounts of necessary truths to have the explanation for why they are necessary be provided by their truth. The explanation: normative propositions are trivially true, that is, they are true and their truth makes no demand on the world – their truth requires no truthmakers. Since all trivial truths are necessary truths, all pure normative propositions are necessary truths.

This is a particularly attractive feature since, as recent work in meta-ethics has highlighted, there is a dearth of direct argument for the necessity of pure moral and normative propositions more generally. This is a very pervasive assumption in meta-ethics that rarely goes defended. Provided that the non-realist cognitivist can provide a case for thinking that normative (and other necessary) truths are trivial – in the sense of not demanding anything of the world for their truth – then they can offer a direct argument for that assumption.

Moreover, notice that non-realist cognitivism can explain the truth of necessary normative propositions *without* positing the necessary existence of any normative facts, properties, and relations. This is a comparative advantage over traditional non-naturalism, which, absent some other option, must posit necessary existents to explain both the truth and necessity of normative propositions.

One might object that other general theories of necessary truths can do this, even for the non-naturalistically inclined. We've already seen that Lewis's modal realism objectionably divorces the reason for the truth of necessary truths from the explanation of why they are necessary, and faces Jubien's moral irrelevance objection. So, it is unlikely to help here. But what of,

(Essentialism) A proposition p is necessary if and only if p is an essential truth (Fine 2002; Rosen 2017, 2020)

According to (Essentialism), all metaphysically necessary truths are essential truths. Essential truths are, or are a logical consequence of, the nature or essence of whatever they concern.⁵⁷ For example, whilst it is part of the nature of John that he is human, it is not part of his nature that he gives to Oxfam. So, whilst it is metaphysically necessary that John is human, it is not that he gives to Oxfam.

(Essentialism) does meet the desideratum of having the reason why some necessary truth is true provide an explanation for its necessity: if it is true that it is necessary that John is human, then it is true because it is an essential truth about John. And it is necessary *because* it is an essential truth about John. Despite this, it is difficult to see how (Essentialism) will help secure an explanation of the *metaphysical* necessity of normative propositions.

Such propositions concern extant properties like rightness, wrongness, goodness, badness, *inter alia*. So, first, the theory must already posit the necessary existence of such entities. A second problem is epistemic: it is unclear, at best, how we can come to know about the *essences*

⁵⁷ By 'essence' and 'nature', Fine and Rosen are invoking the broadly Aristotelian notion of essence that takes essences to constitute what it is for x to be whatever it is. This is contrasted with Kripke-Putnam-style views that take essences and essential truths to be those truths about x that are metaphysically necessary.

of these properties. But third and more importantly, the non-naturalistically inclined have argued that reflection on the nature of normative properties shows that the strong supervenience of the normative on the non-normative is false. For, they argue, there is nothing in the nature of such properties that specifies any essential connection to natural facts or properties.⁵⁸ If that supervenience thesis is false, then pure normative propositions that tell us, for example, what types of natural facts count in favour of what are not metaphysically necessary but, at best, enjoy some *sui generis* form of normative necessity (Rosen 2020).

Non-realist cognitivism as normative trivialism, then, avoids these problems and provides a theory of the metaphysics and ontology of normativity which, additionally, allows us to offer a direct argument for the necessity of normative truths.

§4. Objections

§4.1. (Triviality of Necessity) Undermotivated?

Recall the argument for (Triviality of Necessity). Admitting of non-trivial necessary truths would force upon us a dilemma: a vicious regress of repeatedly citing further necessities to explain the first or treating the first necessity as brute. Assuming that all trivial truths are necessary ((Substantiality of Contingency)), we can avoid this dilemma, Cameron argues, by treating all necessary truths as trivial, that is, by accepting (Triviality of Necessity). Together, they give us (Necessary as Trivial): that a truth is necessary if and only if it is trivial.

An objection: Cameron is *assuming* that no other explanation of what makes truths necessary can avoid the vicious regress. If this assumption is false, then the case given here for

⁵⁸ Indeed, anyone impressed by ‘open question’ arguments will, if they take talk of essences seriously, find it difficult to resist the claim that the essences of normative properties establish no necessary connection with any natural/non-normative properties (see Fine 2002; Rosen 2020 for discussion of this).

thinking that all necessary truths are trivial, even if we assume that all trivial truths are necessary, is undermined.

In response: first, Cameron anticipates this objection. His response is to say that if his opponents are willing to accept that there are *some* trivial necessities – such as those of mathematics – then the benefits of having a *unified* account of necessity provides at least some good reason to think that the explanation for the necessity of all necessary truths should be that their truth makes no demand on the world (Cameron 2010: 412, fn. 15). And, indeed, (Necessary as Trivial) does provide a unified account of necessary truths.

Cameron, however, is particularly open to this objection because he claims that ‘the necessity of any sentence calls out for explanation, and that explanation is *only* forthcoming *if* trivialism is true with respect to that sentence’ (Cameron 2010: 411, my emphasis). But I think we can make a weaker claim that is sufficient for our purposes: that the necessity of a sentence is *better explained* by trivialism than other views that may escape Cameron’s dilemma (and meet the desideratum he outlines for accounts of necessary truths) that motivates (Triviality of Necessity).

Although, like Cameron, I cannot exhaustively explore every other candidate explanation of necessary truths, I will make my comparative case by appeal to Lewis’s modal realism, traditional conventionalism, and (Essentialism).

Whilst providing a unified account of metaphysical modality, Lewis’s modal realism, as we’ve seen, does not meet the desideratum of ensuring that why some necessary truth is true provides an explanation for the necessity of that truth. For that reason, it is also susceptible to modal irrelevance objections like Jubien’s. Moreover, the explanation is substantially less ontologically parsimonious for familiar reasons concerning Lewis’s commitment to his universe

of concrete possible worlds. (Necessary as Trivial), however, meets the desideratum above, avoiding modal irrelevance objections, and avoids positing Lewis' worlds to explain the truth and necessity of necessary truths.

A theory that respects Cameron's desideratum is:

(Conventionalism) C is necessary if and only if C is true because of what 'C' means.

For C is necessary *because* it is true solely in virtue of its meaning (when meanings are not reified) and since its truth depends solely on what it means, it is true regardless of how the world is and so is necessary. Though the explanation of the truth and necessity of C remain distinct, the reason why C is true allows us to explain why C is necessary: since C is true simply in virtue of its meaning, it is necessarily true since C's truth does not depend upon any feature of the world.

The problem with (Conventionalism), however, is that it is independently implausible. All truths, necessary or contingent, are true because they say what they do, or because the world is the way the sentence claims, respectively. When C is necessary, all that is required for C to be true is for it to mean what it does. But this is because what C says must be the case and *not* because all that must obtain for C to be true is that it means what it does. In general, only truths that solely concern what a claim means are true because of what they mean. Otherwise, whilst other truths are true when they mean what they do, they are not true *because* all that must obtain for them to be true is for the claim in question to have a certain meaning. (Necessary as Trivial) avoids such mistakes entirely (Cameron 2010: 402–403).

(Essentialism) does offer a unified explanation of metaphysical necessity that meets Cameron's desideratum: all metaphysical necessities are (or are entailed by) truths about essences and are necessary *because* they concern essences. It may also offer a way to block the regress Cameron envisages whilst avoiding bruteness: a non-trivial necessary truth makes a demand on the world that the essences of whatever it concerns (say the number 2 in 'there is an even prime number') includes or entails the relevant essential truth (for example, that 2 is an even prime number).⁵⁹

But there remain comparative advantages that make (Necessary as Trivial) a better explanation of the necessity of necessary truths. First, (Necessary as Trivial) requires no positing of essences or essential facts, which many find independently objectionable and may reintroduce some metaphysical mystery the non-realist cognitivist wishes to avoid. So (Necessary as Trivial) is more ontologically parsimonious. Second, (Essentialism) must detail how we have epistemic access to such essences. (Necessary as Trivial) avoids this problem by taking the epistemology of modality to concern not epistemic access to some special entities but, instead, to concern coming to learn that the truth of certain claims makes no demand on the world.⁶⁰

(Necessary as Trivial), then, is an independently motivated, unified account of the necessity of necessary truths that enjoys some comparative advantages over competing views, whilst offering an explanation of the necessity of necessary truths inferable from why such truths are true. As such, it remains a plausible view that non-realist cognitivism can appeal to as normative trivialism and enjoy the strengths I have argued it possesses.

⁵⁹ This is not obvious, of course, unless we have an explanation of why the essential truths are the ones that they are.

⁶⁰ This is not to claim that such an epistemological story is simple or obvious for (Necessary as Trivial) either; rather, it is that whatever story must be told avoids having to account for epistemic access to special entities.

§4.2. Existence, Trivialism, and Disquotation

Though himself a trivialist of a form about mathematics, Jamin Asay (2020: 242–244) has argued against the understanding of trivialism Cameron and I employ. Cameron claims that the mathematical trivialist can,

[...] recognise the truth of [...] ‘There are numbers’, ‘The number 2 exists’, etc., but she may treat these simply as more claims whose truth makes no demands on the world, *a fortiori* whose truth does not demand that there be numbers, or the number 2, respectively. (Cameron 2010: 405)

Asay argues that Cameron’s suggestion here is incoherent. For how could it be, for example, that ‘the number 2 exists’ is true without there being numbers? Is it not just an obvious consequence of the truth of ‘the number 2 exists’ that the number 2 exists?

Put this way, the objection is question-begging. We need not assume a Quinean theory of ontological commitment from which it would follow that ‘the number 2 exists’ or ‘there is the number 2’ that the number 2 exists. On a truthmaking-based account of ontological commitment, provided we have reason to believe that 2 is not required for the truth of ‘the number 2 exists’, it is no commitment of ‘the number 2 exists’ that there is some number 2 whose existence makes this claim true. *Mutatis mutandis* for normative propositions.

But the stench of incoherence may remain. For Asay’s final way of putting this point is not question-begging. He says,

‘There are numbers’ cannot be true unless there are numbers. ‘The number 2 exists’ cannot be true unless the number 2 exists. These claims [...] involve *disquotation*, and

nothing more' [...] What I have done is just noticed the *disquotational nature* of 'true'.

(Asay 2020: 243, my emphasis)

Asay is arguing that it follows solely from the disquotational nature of 'true' that 'the number 2 exists' is true only if the number 2 exists. Similarly, then, 'the property of moral wrongness exists' is true, Asay would claim, only if the property of moral wrongness exists. Asay continues, however, that this does not immediately take us back to mathematical Platonism (or, I add, traditional non-naturalism).

For, if we stay with the view of Rayo's that Cameron is developing, we can say that 'the number 2 exists' and that 2 exists but that the number 2 is not an ontological commitment in the sense of some additional entity we are committed to beyond whatever already exists.

To explain, on Rayo's view, for the number of the Fs to be *n just is* for there to be *n* F's. He continues: 'So when God created the planets, and made sure there were exactly eight of them, God *thereby* made it the case that the number of planets was Eight. This was nothing *extra* that She needed to do, or refrain from doing, to bring about the existence of numbers' (Rayo 2013: 75).

On Rayo's view, to suppose that there are no numbers is both false *and absurd*. Assume for *reductio* that there are no numbers. For the number of numbers to be zero *just is* for there to be no numbers. So, the number zero must exist. Contradiction. So, there are numbers (Rayo 2013: 75). In this way, 'there are numbers' apparently has truth conditions whose satisfaction requires nothing of the world. Numbers become, then, *trivial* existents, entities whose existence requires nothing of the world, whilst, for example, planets are *non-trivial* existents since they require the world to be some way for them to exist.

The normative trivialist might wish to take this route and suggest that, for example, the ‘ontological/non-ontological’ distinction Parfit invoked be understood as Rayo’s trivial/non-trivial existence distinction. This would also evade Asay’s objection. But, first, one might worry that the theory will again face, for example, queerness and related objections. Second, I suspect many will think that much of the demystification I have offered of non-realist cognitivism will be lost if it ultimately must rely upon Rayo’s distinction, which they may find independently mysterious.⁶¹

But there is another option. For recall that I argued Parfit’s ‘non-ontological’ sense of ‘exist’ can be understood as a merely *pleonastic* sense of ‘exist’,

(Non-Ontological) x exists in a non-ontological sense if and only if x is what some true proposition not made true by the world is, at least partly, about.

More generally, this can be understood as the claim that something exists in a non-ontological sense just when it is what some proposition that makes no demand on the world for its truth is, at least partly, about. Employing this pleonastic sense of ‘exist’, we can avoid Asay’s objection by saying that, whilst ‘true’ is (at least) a disquotational device, this does not mean that something exists in the ‘ontological’ sense of being something that plays a role in the meeting of some proposition’s demand on the world. Instead, when ‘there is a property of moral wrongness’ is true, there exists such a property in the merely pleonastic sense of being what some true claim

⁶¹ This is also true, I suspect, of Cameron’s (2008a) distinction between what exists and what *really* exists. It will count in favour of non-realist cognitivism if it can enjoy the strengths I’ve argued it has without reliance on such a distinction and instead on truthmaking and an account of necessary truths.

that makes no demand on the world is about. This respects the disquotational nature of ‘truth’ and avoids positing even *trivial* existents into our ontology.⁶²

§4.3. Two Challenges: Truth and Necessity

Non-realist cognitivism as normative trivialism can provide an explanation of the necessity of necessary normative truths: such truths are trivially true, making no demand on the world, and given a claim is necessary if and only if it is trivially true, then necessary normative truths are necessary *because* they make no demand on the world for their truth.

But can the non-realist cognitivist provide an explanation of why normative propositions are *trivially true*? We cannot say ‘because they are necessary’ without pushing the question back: why are normative truths amongst those truths that make no demand on the world? And, if they make no demand on the world for their truth, why are they *true*?

There are two challenges here: the first is to establish why allegedly necessary normative propositions are trivial truths, that is, why they are amongst those claims that make no demand on the world for their truth. Second, assuming they make no such demand, why should we think that they are true as opposed to, for example, necessary falsehoods?

The partners-in-innocence argument I offered in Chapter 1 might seem to answer the first question. But this is too quick. That argument: necessary truths lack truthmakers, normative propositions are not relevantly disanalogous to necessary truths (in fact, they are necessary truths), so normative propositions lack truthmakers. But the question is why we should think that certain normative truths are necessary in the first place such that we can make appeal to

⁶² This also improves upon Cameron’s (2010: 408) anticipation of an objection like Asay’s, where he suggests that such an objection is ‘caught up in a bad view about how language works’. As Asay correctly notes, his objection is based solely upon how ‘true’ can function as a disquotational device.

necessary truths lacking truthmakers to get non-realist cognitivism. As we are understanding it, this question is now: why are normative propositions amongst those that make no demand on the world for their truth?

This question, however, is no *special* problem for non-realist cognitivism (as normative trivialism or otherwise). For most meta-ethical theories assume that some normative propositions are necessary truths and so owe us some explanation for why. Non-realist cognitivism is, in fact, dialectically at an *advantage* here. For if their opponents grant that normative propositions are metaphysically necessary, then all the non-realist cognitivist is doing is inserting their general theory of what makes any claim metaphysically necessary and getting the result that normative and other necessary propositions are also those that make no demand on the world for their truth (which follows from their necessity). And if they make no demand on the world, they lack truthmakers and, in turn, we also get an *explanation* for their necessity: that they make no demand on the world for their truth.

So, the challenge non-realist cognitivism mainly faces – given the widespread assumption of the metaphysical necessity of normative truths – is to explain why necessary normative propositions *are trivially true* and not *trivially false*. That is, why are they true without making any demand on the world as opposed to necessarily false without making any demand on the world. For example, the negation of the law of non-contradiction is presumably a necessary falsehood and it is plausibly one that makes no demand on the world. Why are normative truths not necessarily false in this way, as some error theorists believe, and, instead, true?

There is no easy answer here for *any* theory that claims that there are (non-relativistically or not) normative truths. Some ways of defending this claim are purely defensive. We might, as Parfit appeared to, argue by elimination for non-realist cognitivism and defend it against

objections (in conjunction with truthmaker theory, rejection of truthmaker maximalism, its account of ontological commitment, and account of necessary truths). If that can be done, then we may have a satisfactory understanding of non-realist cognitivism that avoids all common objections to it, evades my dilemma, and looks an attractive theory.

But traditional non-naturalists like Enoch might claim a distinctive advantage here: they can claim that normative propositions are true, and necessarily so, because they require truthmakers and those truthmakers both exist and exist necessarily. For example, perhaps ‘there is a reason to avoid suffering’ is true because its truthmaker, some non-natural fact F, exists. And perhaps the constituents of that fact – such as a reason property or relation – exist necessarily, and so ‘there is a reason to avoid suffering’ is necessarily true.

The success of this explanation, however, is far from clear. For this explanation requires us to ask further why the truthmakers (or constituents for truthmakers) for normative propositions *necessarily* exist. *Prima facie*, we either face again a regress or we must take the existence of these necessary existents as brute, ungrounded or unexplained. Notice, again, how non-realist cognitivism avoids this worry by treating necessary truths *simpliciter* as making no demand on the world for their truth. So, it is unclear, at best, that the traditional non-naturalist appeal to necessary existents gives it any advantage over non-realist cognitivism in justifying thinking that some normative propositions are necessary truths.

Still, one may worry that non-realist cognitivism requires an independent argument for thinking that necessary normative propositions are necessarily true rather than false. Whilst the view cannot make appeal to what exists, or features of the world more generally, to explain this, as explained in Chapter 1 it can appeal to first-order normative resources to try to show that we have good reason to think that some normative propositions (which we are assuming are

necessary) are both true and depend upon no existents for their truth. Whether this suffices remains to be seen. But it is important to see that it is not hopeless. It opens the door to interesting questions about whether normative ethical debate can help resolve metaphysical and ontological questions about normativity. I will explore one such question in Chapter 6.

§5. Conclusion

Non-realist cognitivism faces the challenge of justifying its rejection of truthmaker maximalism, and treating normative propositions as truthmaker-less truths, without demotivating truthmaking altogether. In this chapter, I examined whether an appeal to necessary truths as partners-in-innocence offers the justification sought.

I introduced mathematical trivialism and the theory of necessary truths offered by Cameron in §2. I argued there, and in §3, that non-realist cognitivism can be developed into a view I call normative trivialism. Modelled on mathematical trivialism, normative trivialism maintains that all necessary truths are trivial truths, that is, truths that make no demand on the world for their truth, and that normative propositions make no demands on the world for their truth and, thus, are necessary.

This view, I argued in §3, offers a justification for denying truthmaker maximalism without demotivating truthmaking *simpliciter*. For contingent truths are non-trivial truths, that is, truths that make some demand on the world to be true. This lets us say that contingent truths require truthmakers because they make a demand on the world to be true. Necessary truths, in making no such demand, do not require truthmakers. I argue that this allows the non-realist cognitivist to capture some of the general motivation for truthmaking *simpliciter*. Moreover, it also allows the non-realist cognitivist to enjoy all the advantages of the view I defended in Chapter 1,

in addition to evading my dilemma, and, significantly, to offer an independently plausible direct argument for the metaphysical necessity of (pure) normative propositions.

In §4, I responded to three objections: that the theory of necessary truths normative trivialism relies upon is undermotivated, that trivialism *simpliciter* as I am understanding it faces a strong objection from the disquotational nature of ‘true’, and that normative trivialism lacks a plausible account of why necessary normative truths are necessarily *true*. I argued that none of these objections are persuasive.

The latter highlights, however, that in addition to all non-realist cognitivism can say, it would strengthen the view to have a further positive argument for it beyond what I have said here. We should, however, take note of how *far* we have come. Non-realist cognitivism is often dismissed as borderline unintelligible, entirely unmotivated, ad hoc, or worse. I have argued that, regardless of whether it can escape my dilemma, the theory is demonstrably none of these.

Moreover, there are at least two *prima facie* plausible forms of non-realist cognitivism: one where truth and fact pluralism is employed to justify its truthmaker anti-maximalism, and another where a general theory of necessary truths is appealed to in justifying their anti-maximalism. I have argued here that the latter, non-realist cognitivism as normative trivialism, is a surprisingly attractive view. It can justify the version of truthmaker theory that non-realist cognitivism is best understood as relying upon, whilst allowing it to enjoy the strengths of the view I’ve outlined. And it provides the ever-elusive argument for the necessity of pure normative truths often assumed but undefended: that normative propositions are trivial truths, not making any demand on the world for their truth, and trivial truths are metaphysically necessary.

Chapter 3

Irrealist Cognitivism, Non-Existence, and Meinongian Meta-Ethics

§1. Introduction

Do moral or other normative facts, properties, and relations exist? Answering negatively is presumed to be definitive of an error theory about them. Suppose all normative claims concern reason relations. If reason relations do not exist, then, presumably, there are no such relations to which we can refer or which count in favour of anything. This seems to leave all normative claims false; error theory follows.

The above, however, involves several assumptions. First, that if some entity x fails to exist, then we cannot successfully refer to x . Second, that if x does not exist, then x cannot have properties. Third, that the truth of claims about x requires the existence of x (or some appropriately related entities to x). Fourth, that there are no non-existent objects and instead of x lacking some first-order property of existence, x 's non-existence just means that there is no x , that is, $\neg(\exists y) (y = x)$.

It is widely assumed that non-existent objects that we can refer to, which have properties, and which are the proper subject⁶³ of some true propositions were decisively refuted by W.V.O Quine and one-time-believer Bertrand Russell.⁶⁴ This perception is so widespread that many have either ignored the view altogether or concluded it 'an absurd doctrine'. (Cargile 1979:

⁶³ 'Proper subject' contrasts with the apparent subject of a statement that may be eliminated through some logical analysis, as Russell's theory of description offers for various claims (see Routley & Routley 1973).

⁶⁴ See Quine (1948); Russell (1905a; 1905b; 1907; 1919: 169).

175–176). Meta-ethics is no exception. There is no widely discussed normative metaphysical theory that appeals to non-existent objects.

But the view that there are non-existent objects which have properties and to which we can refer – ‘refer’ in the intentional sense of thinking about, remembering, representing, *inter alia*, and in the linguistic sense of naming, quantifying over, talking about, *inter alia* – has been revived.⁶⁵ Curiously, however, none of its revivers have engaged with normative metaphysics, leaving unexplored whether normative properties or relations are plausibly non-existent objects.⁶⁶

Enter John Skorupski’s irrealist cognitivism.⁶⁷ According to Skorupski, there are objectively true propositions that concern irreducibly normative reason relations. But such reason relations, *pace* traditional non-naturalism about normativity, *do not exist*. They are non-existent objects which we can think and talk about, which have properties like *being a relation*, and which are objective and mind-independent.

I suspect many find irrealist cognitivism puzzling. It remains largely unengaged with by those who discuss views understood as ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’ realism, is yet to receive a sympathetic treatment, and most engagement with it worries over commitment to non-existent

⁶⁵ Most often associated with Alexius Meinong (1904) and his student Ernst Mally (1912), defences of non-existent objects have been mounted by at least Graham Priest (2016 [2005]); Francesco Berto (2012; 2013); Richard Routley [later called Sylvan] (1966; 1980; 1982; 2003) and Valerie Routley (1973); Terence Parsons (1979a; 1979b; 1980; 1982); Dale Jacquette (1989; 1996); Edward N. Zalta (1983; 1988); William Rapaport (1978; 1985); Nathan Salmon (1987; 1998); and Colin McGinn (2000). See Reischer (2019) for discussion.

⁶⁶ This is especially curious since, as John Findlay (1963: Ch. IX) and Marek (2021: §7) highlight, Meinong himself explored the relationship between his theory of objects and value theory.

⁶⁷ Sometimes calling it ‘cognitivist irrealism’, Skorupski has developed his view across (Skorupski 1999; 2000; 2006), with its most complete defence in (Skorupski 2010). Responses to critics are offered in (Skorupski 2012b) and (Skorupski 2017).

objects or doubts whether such objects help resolve standard metaphysical objections to non-naturalism.⁶⁸

This chapter has three aims. First, to argue that the mutual disregard of meta-ethics and theories of non-existent objects is a mistake. Second, to raise a series of strong objections to Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism that arise from attention to the literature on non-existent objects. Third, to highlight avenues for further development, and the challenges they face, of theories of the irreducibly normative as non-existent objects.

I proceed as follows. In §2, I introduce irrealist cognitivism and theories of non-existent objects, before explaining why refusal to engage with irrealist cognitivism because it admits of non-existent objects would be a mistake. I turn, in §3, to consider objections that have been raised to irrealist cognitivism. These objections, I argue, are based either on important misunderstandings or fail to acknowledge how irrealist cognitivism can best dismiss standard metaphysical objections to non-naturalism. Then, I highlight five reasons why we should take theories like irrealist cognitivism seriously. I argue in §4 that the view faces three strong objections whilst indicating avenues for further development of the view. I conclude in §5.

§2. Irrealist Cognitivism and Meinongianism

§2.1. The Normative View and Irrealist Cognitivism

John Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism forms one of four primary claims he defends in his magisterial *The Domains of Reasons* (Skorupski 2010). In over 500 pages, Skorupski develops and defends a view in opposition to what he calls *Global Realism*, which is the conjunction of:

⁶⁸ Irrealist cognitivism is, to my knowledge, mostly discussed in Olson (2012; 2018: 265–268); Railton (2012); Sylvan (2016); and Copp (2018: 585–586). Also see the book reviews of Skorupski (2010) such as Lillehammer (2011) and Reisner (2013).

(Factualism) To assert any (non-analytic) proposition is to say that some fact obtains.

(Cognition Independence) Facts are cognition independent.⁶⁹

To explain, Skorupski distinguishes *purely nominal* and *substantial* facts:

(Nominal) The nominal fact that *p* is identical with the nominal fact *q* if and only if the statement that *p* is true has the same sense as – expresses the same proposition as – the statement that *q*.

(Substantial) The substantial fact that *p* is identical with the substantial fact that *q* if and only if the fact that *p* is isomorphically constituted of the same attributes and (where relevant) objects as the fact that *q*.

The first is the familiar deflationary notion of a fact: the nominal fact that *p* is identical with the true (non-Russellian) proposition that *p*. On this notion, if ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ have different Fregean senses, then ‘Hesperus is a planet’ and ‘Phosphorus is a planet’ are distinct facts. This notion amounts to the Fregean view that ‘a fact is a thought that is true’ and to say it is a fact that *p* is just to state that *p* obtains (Frege 1977: 25).

⁶⁹ Skorupski (2010: 7, fn. 6) characterises ‘local realism’ as the conjunction of these claims about a particular domain of discourse, such that rejecting global realism does not entail rejecting local realism about some particular domain. Also, neither global nor local realism entails that the cognition independent facts posited in some or all domains *obtain* and so, on Skorupski’s view, local and global error theories are forms of ‘realism’.

Substantial facts are structured entities that are constituted of what Skorupski calls ‘attributes’ or ‘substantial properties’ (Skorupski 2010: 7, 41–44, 403–405, 469–472).⁷⁰ Naturalists might thus think all the substantial facts are natural facts where, for example, all substantial properties and attributes are ones that can be causes or causally acted upon. A non-naturalist, alternatively, might think that there are some substantial facts that have *sui generis* non-natural constituents, like an irreducibly normative property of wrongness.

Reading (Factualism) as the claim that to assert any proposition is to claim that some *nominal* fact obtains renders it trivial. As Skorupski says, ‘to assert that *p* is to assert the truth of the proposition that *p*, and thus to assert it to be a fact—in the nominal sense—that *p*’ (Skorupski 2010: 7). But when couched in terms of *substantial* facts, (Factualism) is not trivial: it suggests that asserting any proposition makes a claim about what exists, be they natural or non-natural entities, properties, or relations.⁷¹

Skorupski characterises the ‘Critical tradition’ in philosophy, in which he places Kant, Wittgenstein, and the Vienna Circle in the early twentieth century, as seeking to avoid ‘the Sceptic’ who doubts all warrant for belief and ‘the Dogmatist’ who holds that some beliefs must simply be accepted. The Critical tradition accepts that belief requires warrant and that we do have sufficient reason to accept some of our beliefs. It seeks to show *how* we find ourselves with warranted beliefs. By targeting alleged assumptions these figures make whilst maintaining that such assumptions are no part of ‘ordinary’ or ‘common’ cognition, it is hoped that one can both highlight the error of their opponents whilst restoring pre-philosophical faith in our beliefs.

⁷⁰ This understanding of ‘fact’ makes substantial facts true Russellian propositions: structured, worldly entities composed of existing properties, relations, and objects. Skorupski also countenances merely nominal *properties*, like the sense of a predicate.

⁷¹ Henceforth, I read (Factualism) as concerning substantial and not merely nominal facts.

The Sceptic and the Dogmatist, Skorupski believes, are bred by assuming (Factualism) and (Cognition Independence). If we accept them, then ‘no knowledge at all is possible’ (Skorupski 2010: 7). Neither claim, Skorupski believes, is in fact part of the epistemic situation that we find ourselves in. The task, then, for the Critical theorist, is to explain which of these two claims we should reject and why they ever seemed part of our ordinary epistemic lives.⁷²

The key, Skorupski believes, to unlocking the grip he sees global realism as having over philosophy lies in thinking ‘ordinary thought’ does not commit us to thinking that,

[...] *all* our assertions are factual assertions. On the contrary, common sense positively favours the idea that there is a fundamental difference of kind between stating facts, on the one hand, and discussing what to think, how to react, what to do, on the other. In many cases such discussion reaches normative conclusions, but these conclusions are not about some further set of facts. (Skorupski 2010: 19)

This is the intuitive material from which Skorupski fashions his *Normative View*:

(A) Normative propositions are propositions about reason relations.⁷³

⁷² On Skorupski’s (2010: 9–13) reading, Kant rejects (Cognition Independence) for temporal and spatio-temporal facts, and rejects (Factualism) by revising our understanding of empirical assertions such that *none* of them are substantive factual claims at all but, rather, claims about the cognition-dependent facts we have epistemic access to (this is a transcendental idealist reading of Kant). He takes Wittgenstein to reject (Factualism) by interpreting Wittgenstein’s rule-following remarks as suggesting that the very idea of substantial normative facts is incoherent (Skorupski 2010: 444–447, 451–452). Finally, he understands the Vienna Circle (mostly Carnap) to defend a rejection of (Cognition Independence) by appeal to a radical linguistic relativity of discourse and thought around linguistic rules, via appeal to a verificationist theory of linguistic meaning (Skorupski 2010: 13–18).

⁷³ Skorupski is thus committed to a ‘reasons-first’ view of normativity and a ‘buck-passing’ account of value. See Broome (2018) and Stratton-Lake (2018) for discussion.

- (B) There is a fundamental epistemological and ontological distinction between factual propositions and *a priori* propositions about reason relations (that is, *purely* normative propositions).⁷⁴
- (C) All (synthetic) *a priori* propositions are in the first place normative.⁷⁵
- (D) Reason relations are unreal objects of true and false thoughts.

The Normative View promises to show that knowledge is possible because some purely normative propositions about epistemic reasons, that do not concern substantial facts, are known (synthetic) *a priori* claims. Skorupski thus hopes to reject (Factualism) – purely normative propositions do not assert (substantive) factual claims but concern the obtaining of reason relations – whilst retaining (Cognition Independence):

Global realism [...] is the view that all (non-analytic) propositions are factual, where a factual proposition says that some substantial fact obtains. According to global realism the two assertions ‘The world consists of all the facts’ and ‘The world is everything that is the case’ are the same. But on the Normative view they are not the same, because the Normative view is irrealist about purely normative propositions.⁷⁶ The world consists of all the substantial facts, but *what is the case* is broader. (Skorupski 2010: 405)

Amongst ‘what is the case’ are objectively and mind-independently true purely normative propositions about reasons for action, belief, and feeling – ‘norms’ – which have as their objects

⁷⁴ Purely normative propositions, for Skorupski, are propositions about reason relations ‘from which it cannot be deduced that any [substantial] fact obtains’ (Skorupski 2010: 508).

⁷⁵ Skorupski adds ‘in the first place’ because he believes certain epistemic norms generate non-normative claims, though because those norms are *a priori* he believes these non-normative claims are true (Skorupski 2010: 29, fn. 32, §6.6, §9.4, §20.5).

⁷⁶ Skorupski often calls true purely normative propositions ‘norms’ (Skorupski 1999: 448, fn. 11; Skorupski 2010: *Passim*).

irreal reason relations. This is (D) and our primary concern to which we'll shortly turn. But, first, we need two last parts of Skorupski's view.

First, Skorupski accepts forms of deflationism about both truth and all truthmaking talk:

Purely normative propositions have no truth makers, but then nor do any propositions, in the sense of 'make true' intended by the correspondence theorist. In that sense no proposition is made true by a fact. We are not rejecting the correspondence theory for normative propositions, while retaining it for factual propositions. We are rejecting it entirely. But we shouldn't abandon the phrase 'make true' to the correspondence theorist. In more ordinary senses *of course* facts can make a normative proposition true. What makes it true that you are acting wrongly is the fact that you are causing suffering, and doing so because of the pleasure it gives you. In this sense there are, precisely, facts that make normative but *not* factual claims true! (Skorupski 2010: 434)

It is noteworthy that Skorupski fails to distinguish between theories of truth and truthmaking. Elsewhere, he explicitly conflates them: 'the correspondence theory of truth, or the view that all truths have truth-makers' (Skorupski 2018: 604).⁷⁷ But his point is clear: we should accept deflationism about truth, treating truth as a merely *nominal* property, and about any talk of truthmaking. Instead, we should say that '*p* is made true by *q*' is understood as '*p* is true because of *q*', where we read the 'because of' as simply indicating an explanation for some claim's truth.⁷⁸ In doing so, Skorupski avoids the charge of ontological cheating of Chapter 1 by rejecting the substantive notion of truthmaking *simpliciter*.

⁷⁷ As we've seen, this is symptomatic of meta-ethical debate and illicitly collapses regions of logical space. I think this also helps explain the mistake Skorupski (2018) makes in thinking Parfit must be committed to something like *irrealist* cognitivism.

⁷⁸ Compare the deflationism about truthmaking of Tim Williamson's encountered in Chapter 1.

Second, Skorupski distinguishes between two sources of knowledge: *receptivity* and *spontaneity*.⁷⁹

Skorupski believes all of our knowledge comes from one of two ‘epistemic materials’ (2010: 29–30). Our judgements about what exists, Skorupski argues, involve some form of awareness (perception or apperception) of causally engaged substantial facts. My belief that it is sunny outside, for example, is based on my perception of the substantial fact that it is sunny outside, and, if true, is true partly because that substantial fact obtains. This is *receptivity*: our knowledge of what exists involves sensitivity – ‘receptivity’ – to substantial facts that impinge upon the agent and provide the epistemic material from which we make judgements about what exists.

But some knowledge, Skorupski believes, involves *no* such awareness. Instead, the other epistemic material we have is *spontaneity*. This ‘is a property of responses and dispositions to respond’ to questions of what counts as a reason for what. That is, a property of ‘epistemic normative dispositions’ that they come ‘in the right way [...] from the actor’s nature (Skorupski 2010: 406). Spontaneous normative dispositions are neither ‘factitious’ in being ‘accepted uncritically into one’s thinking from others’ nor merely ‘conventional’ since conventional dispositions (e.g., to drive on one side of the road) are due to receptive awareness of a convention (Skorupski 2010: 406). Instead, if we have a disposition to believe some normative proposition simply upon coming to understand it, then we have a spontaneous disposition, and this confers upon our belief some ‘default epistemic weight’ (Skorupski 2010: 414).⁸⁰

⁷⁹ This distinction is Kant’s (though see Skorupski 2010: 405–410 for differences between Skorupski and Kant’s understandings of it).

⁸⁰ Skorupski (2010: 415) denies that spontaneity is just another rephrasing of a common ‘intuition-based’ normative epistemology. Those views, he thinks, posit ‘objectual non-natural awareness’ of substantive non-natural facts, properties, or relations, which he denies. Instead, the warrant generated by finding oneself spontaneously disposed

This warrant is not factive and can be defeated. One source of defeat is learning our disposition is *not* spontaneous but factitious, due, say, to mere hearsay. But Skorupski also accepts a *convergence thesis*: if one judges that p , then one is rationally committed to thinking that either anyone else in one's epistemic situation would agree that p or that one could fault their purely normative judgements about (epistemic or other) reasons (Skorupski 2010: 412). Learning there is insufficient reason to believe that those with whom one disagrees are engaged in some faulty reasoning, then, can defeat one's spontaneous warrant for p . Finally, Skorupski believes that should one have an *undefeated* spontaneous disposition – one that is not factitious and survives dialogical scrutiny – to believe a purely normative proposition p , then, since the 'epistemic basis' of such propositions 'lies solely in spontaneity and convergence' one is 'outright warranted in believing it' that is, 'that is enough for us to claim knowledge of p ' (Skorupski 2010: 415–416).

But why should we think that purely normative propositions are objectively true and not somehow mind-dependent? *Prima facie*, if our means of having normative knowledge is consulting what we have spontaneous dispositions to believe that survive dialogical scrutiny, this makes the objects of our knowledge look suspiciously dependent upon cognising agents.

We can now appreciate the importance of (D), and commitment to non-existent objects, for Skorupski's view. In accepting deflationism about truth and truth-making, treating normative facts and propositions as merely nominal, accepting his spontaneity-based epistemology for the normative, and not appealing to first-order normative enquiry to settle the objectivity of normative claims, Skorupski is *prima facie* without any explanation for the mind-independence

to believe some normative proposition involves *no* receptive awareness of *any* substantive facts. Instead, the objects of such knowledge, as we'll see, are purely nominal facts about non-existent reason relations. Jonas Olson (2012: 194–195) argues Skorupski misunderstands these 'intuition-based' views.

and objectivity of reason relations. Unless, that is, the objects of our normative knowledge just are mind-independent, objective irreal reason relations.

To explain: Skorupski rejects what he calls the ‘semantic condition’ according to which ‘whatever can be thought and talked about is real’ (Skorupski 2010: 421). Instead, he argues that the only condition that whatever can be thought or talked about must meet is an ‘anchoring’ condition that ‘we know and can communicate to each other what we are talking about’ (Skorupski 2010: 423).

This only entails, Skorupski argues, that whatever we can refer to is *actual*. So, the only condition that meaningful talk of, say, Ferdowsi’s Rostam requires is that we can mutually understand and communicate to one another what we are talking about. For example, I can say ‘the father of Sohrab’ or ‘the hero of the Shahnameh’ and, in doing so, we can both refer to the fictional Rostam. Rostam then, though, fictional, is an *actual* fictional object.

Actuality and *existence*, however, are distinct. Anything we can meaningfully talk about is actual – be it reason relations, fictional objects, elan vitale, frictionless planes, dinosaurs, faster-than-light spaceships, *inter alia*. But existence, to Skorupski, is a first-order property that some actual things have and others lack. This property is characterised by the ‘causal condition’, a synthetic identity claim that x exists if and only if x has causal standing (Skorupski 2010: 426–428). This means that he denies that mere quantification over an object commits you to its existence. Rather, quantification picks out some actual x to discuss. To commit ourselves to the existence of something, we must claim that x exists, that is, x has causal standing.

Skorupski admits of a distinction amongst the actual: those things that are real (that is, what exists through causal standing) and those that are *irreal* (that is, things we can meaningfully

talk about and refer to, which have properties, but lack causal standing). Finally, the class of irrealis bifurcates for Skorupski into the non-objective or mind-dependent irrealis and the objective irrealis. The former include fictional objects and ‘putative reals’, objects of thought that we thought exist but do not like witches, elan vitale, and frictionless planes. The objective irrealis, for Skorupski, are reason relations. Reason relations are actual counting-in-favour-of relations between facts and what they count in favour of – actual, but *non-existent*.

His view of the ontology of reason relations, Skorupski thus suggests, ‘back[s] up’ (Skorupski 2010: 416) his view that recognising what reason relations obtain is not a matter of receptivity whilst not forcing us into ‘conventionalism or voluntarism about reasons either’ (Skorupski 2010: 418). For if there are objective, mind-independent reason relations which do not exist but which we can refer to (in both the linguistic and intentional senses), have mind-independent properties, and whose presence amongst those things we can refer to does not depend upon us at all, then he may have what he needs. Letting ‘A’ stand for any agent, and taking normative knowledge to concern reason relations, we can formulate a master argument:

(P1) For all x , x exists if and only if x has causal standing.

(P2) If A has normative knowledge and reason relations exist, then this knowledge must involve receptivity.

(P3) A’s normative knowledge does not involve receptivity.

(C1) So, either it is not the case that A has normative knowledge or it is not the case that reason relations exist.

(P4) A has normative knowledge.

(C2) So, it is not the case that reason relations exist (that is, they are irreal).

(P5) Reason relations are either mind-dependent or mind-independent non-existent objects.

(P6) It is not the case that reason relations are mind-dependent non-existent objects.

(C3) So, reason relations are mind-independent non-existent objects.

The lack of meta-ethical discussion of Skorupski's view, and of the background meta-ontology it relies upon, forces speculation as to why it has often gone ignored. I suspect that most meta-ethicists confronted with Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism have one of two reactions. First, they may balk at talk of non-existent objects and think this sufficient reason to ignore the view; such talk may seem irredeemably confused or unmotivated. Second, they may think that even if we can make sense of non-existent objects, doing so has no interesting consequences for meta-ethics. Both reactions are mistaken.

§2.2. Meinongianism?

What could it mean to say that *there are* reason relations that *do not exist*? Is this not The Madness of Meinong we recovered from long ago? The philosophical myth that commitment to non-existent objects is absurd is as pervasive as it is mistaken. Meta-ethics is just yet to hear the news.

Unicorns do not exist. That is a negative existential claim: a denial of the existence of something. It seems to be meaningful, to concern unicorns, and to be true. Seemingly true denials of existence are ubiquitous. Consider when we claim that fictional characters do not exist or, perhaps, that abstract objects do not exist. These simple observations generate an ancient puzzle about how we can talk and think about what does not exist. We can follow Francesco Berto (2013: 6) in formulating this puzzle as,

(P1) To deny the existence of something, one refers to that thing.

(P2) But if one refers to something, then that thing must exist (or: it is impossible to refer to something that does not exist).

(C) So, to deny the existence of something, that thing must exist.⁸¹

This argument threatens to show that meaningful, true denials of the existence of x paradoxically requires the existence of x . For, the argument goes, one cannot refer to something that does not exist; for one's negative existential to be meaningful and true, it must refer to something. But now we face paradox and seem forced to accept that what look like meaningful and true negative existentials are either meaningless or false. Call this *the paradox of non-being*.

There are two ways out: denying (P1) or (P2). That is, either arguing that we can deny the existence of something without referring to it, or that we can refer to and make true claims about things that do not exist.

Most philosophers believe that we can have meaningful, true negative existentials whilst denying (P1). This, they think, is very good news, since denying (P2) would require positing non-existent objects, which they believe, in Russell's memorable phrase, 'offend that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies' (Russell 1919: 169). This denial of (P1) involves accepting:

(‘Exists’ as Instantiation) To claim that ‘ x exists’ is not to make a claim about x . Rather, it is to make a claim about concepts, properties, or propositional functions.

(Existence as Second-Order) Existence is a second-order property of property-instantiation or exemplification (and not a first-order property of individual entities).

⁸¹ See Cartwright (1960: 21) for another clear statement.

(Existence as Blanket Property) Something's having a first-order property of existence would 'make no difference' to it; there is no non-dummy existence property that adds anything to the object it is ascribed to.

(Quantification as Ontologically Committing) To quantify over something with phrases such as 'some', 'there is', 'there are' in natural language, and with the formal existential quantifier, commits one to the existence of that thing.

(Paraphrase) Apparent reference to non-existents via definite descriptions, proper names, or other linguistic devices can be paraphrased away via existential quantification.

Together, these claims comprise what might be called the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view of existence.⁸² Take 'Unicorns exist'. *Prima facie*, this is a meaningful but false subject-predicate form sentence that ascribes a first-order property of existence to unicorns. Not so. According to the above view, 'Unicorns exist' is not about unicorns at all – rather, it is about the property *being a unicorn*. Where 'Ux' is 'is a unicorn', the claim is translated as: $(\exists x)(Ux)$. This is because what it is to claim that x exists is that x instantiates some property – here, *being a unicorn*. And this claim looks both meaningful and false: there is no x such that x is a unicorn.

Take now 'Unicorns do not exist'. This general existential statement is not to be understood, despite appearances, as being about unicorns. Instead, it is something like 'the

⁸² Kant (1999 [1781]) is famously read as accepting the first three claims, arguing 'existence' is not a *real* or *discriminating* predicate, instead being a 'merely logical' one (that is, one that expresses a trivial feature of anything whatsoever, like the predicate 'is self-identical'). He likely rejected the last two (see Priest (2016: xxix)). All five claims receive early articulation in Frege (1891), who argued that existence is a second order Fregean concept, that is, a function that maps its arguments to truth-values, which takes first-order concepts and properties as its arguments. They are later developed by Russell (1905b; 1918), where his theory of descriptions is used to paraphrase away apparent reference to non-existents via definite descriptions. Quine (1948) finally extends Russell's treatment of existential claims to proper names and argues for a general methodology in ontology based upon assuming these five claims. These views are close to dogma today, the most vocal defender being Peter van Inwagen (1998; 2001; 2009).

property of *being a unicorn* is not instantiated' or ' $\neg(\exists x) (Ux)$ '. Since these latter claims are both meaningful and true, it appears that we can preserve the intuitive meaningfulness and truth-value of the former via this *paraphrase* and defuse the paradox by denying (P1). We can thus deny the existence of something without referring to it at all but, instead, by using existential quantification and denying that some property is being instantiated.

But take *singular* existential claims and terms, like the proper name 'Rostam' or singular terms like 'the father of Sohrab' that appear in 'Rostam is a great warrior' or 'the father of Sohrab commits filicide'. Since Rostam does not exist, we might think the paradox of non-being rearises here. Since Russell's (1905b) theory of descriptions, however, it has been suggested that such apparent reference to non-existent objects can be analysed out of sentences in which they appear by treating them as covert definite descriptions. 'The present king of France is bald' is both meaningful and false, since 'the present king of France' is not, despite appearances, a genuine singular term but, instead, a covert false definite description: 'There is exactly one present king of France, and some present king of France is bald'.

Assuming that 'there is', 'there are', and 'some' are correctly captured by the existential quantifier of first-order logic, this view involves taking existence to be expressed by the existential quantifier of standard first-order logic. But doesn't 'exist' appear to be a first-order predicate, at least commonly in English? These theorists can allow that 'exists' can be expressed via a predicate defined via quantification and identity:

$$(\text{Dummy-Existence}) (Ex) = \text{df. } (\exists y) (y = x)$$

But importantly, this is a *dummy* predicate. That is, it expresses a property that is a trivial feature of everything: namely, self-identity. The first-order property of existence this view can

make sense of, then, suggests existence *makes no difference* – it is a trivial feature of anything we can truthfully quantify over, that is, anything that exists.

The influence of this package of views is so pervasive that its implicit acceptance is often left wholly unremarked upon, especially in ‘applied’ metaphysical debates such as in normative metaphysics. Assuming it, for example, is part of what prevents serious consideration of views that posit non-existent objects: entities to which we can refer, quantify over without commitment to their existence, and which have properties we can truthfully predicate of them.

One reason why is that the package suggests that one of the primary motivations for doing so – defusing the paradox of non-being – can be done without taking non-existent objects seriously.⁸³ But the success of the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view here is *far* from obvious. It warrants belabouring why since, without doing so, positing non-existent object may strike meta-ethicists as entirely unmotivated.

We do seem to use ‘exist(s)’ as a first-order predicate ascribing a property to individuals, and we seem to refer to non-existent objects all the time. Assuming those who accept the above view wish to avoid commitment to the fictional, mythical, abstract, and other *prima facie* non-existent entities, they must provide plausible paraphrases of such existential claims, and seeming reference to non-existents, whilst preserving their apparent meaning and truth-value.⁸⁴

The view seemed able to do this for *general* existence claims like ‘Unicorns exist’. But take a *singular* existential claim: ‘Socrates exists’. Since ‘Unicorns exist’ is to be paraphrased as ‘the

⁸³ (Quantification as Ontologically Committing) also, as we’ll see, suggests Meinongianism may be incoherent.

⁸⁴ One may wish to hold onto the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view but accept either that *prima facie* non-existent objects in fact exist or that claims about them are not literally true but, say, merely true-in-a-fiction. I cannot discuss these options here, though their problems are widely acknowledged. See, for example, Kroon & Voltolini (2019) on fictional objects.

property of *being a unicorn* has at least one instantiation’, must we paraphrase ‘Socrates exists’ as ‘Socrates is instantiated’? If so, this is *prima facie* implausible. For individuals are not the kind of entity than can be instantiated. Rather, they are the kind of thing in which instantiations occur. For example, wisdom is instantiated in Socrates, but Socrates himself cannot be instantiated by anything.⁸⁵

A response: if existence is property-instantiation, ‘Socrates exists’ is to be understood as saying that there is some property P that is instantiated by Socrates. But as Colin McGinn (2000: 29) has argued, this property should be a uniquely identifying one. For otherwise, if it were, say, only the property of *being a man*, then why should we think that ‘the property of being a man is instantiated by Socrates’ is a plausible paraphrase that preserves the meaning of ‘Socrates exists’ rather than a sentence about some other man? This seems to require the positing of *haecceistic* properties, that is, properties that exactly one individual can have. Granting such properties *arguendo*, a plausible candidate is *being identical with x*, where *x* is some specific object, since only *x* has that property. ‘Socrates exists’, then, becomes ‘the property of being identical with Socrates is instantiated’: $(\exists x) (x = \text{Socrates})$.⁸⁶

But $x = x$ holds, as a matter of logical necessity, for any *x*. Via existential generalisation, it follows that $(\exists x) (x = x)$. As Berto highlights, this is grounds for doubting the success of the paraphrase. Socrates’s existence turns out to consist in his identity with something or his self-identity. But when one utters ‘Socrates exists’, it seems implausible to suggest that anyone means to claim that Socrates is self-identical or identical with anything. For this makes ‘Socrates exists’ be immediately entailed by a logical necessity that any thing is identical with itself.

⁸⁵ See Berto (2013: 43) for discussion.

⁸⁶ There is some intuitive difference between ‘is identical with Socrates’ and ‘instantiates Socrates-identity’. But the differences are not relevant here and this formulation is friendly to nominalists who accept the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view (see Berto 2013: 43 for discussion).

Moreover, the truth-value of ‘Socrates = Socrates’ or ‘Socrates is identical with something’ is always true if once true, whilst ‘Socrates exists’ is true when uttered during Socrates’s life and false afterwards. As Barry Miller puts it:

That there is a difference between Socrates being Socrates and Socrates existing is evident from the fact that, once true, ‘Socrates is Socrates’ can never be false, whereas ‘Socrates exists’ can. (Miller 1975: 353)

Second, learning that Socrates exists can convey informative and exciting news to you (say, of Socrates’s immortality and the profound inefficacy of hemlock). But learning that ‘Socrates is identical with something’ or ‘Socrates = Socrates’ does not. These considerations are vividly summarised by Robert Meyer and Karel Lambert:

It is ridiculous that from $x = x$ the logician may assert ‘Caesar = Caesar’, withhold comment on ‘Pegasus = Pegasus’ [...] and ring up his archaeological colleague with respect to ‘Romulus = Romulus’ [...] we do not expect to hear him utter, while reading the paper over his morning coffee, ‘By God, Romulus is self-identical after all!’ (Meyer and Lambert 1968: 10)

Problems remain even with singular negative existentials. Take ‘Socrates does not exist’. If ‘Socrates exists’ is understood as ‘Socrates instantiates at least one property’ then, *prima facie*, ‘it is not the case that Socrates exists’ must mean ‘Socrates does not instantiate any property’. But, first, as Berto (2013: 45) highlights, this seems to require taking Socrates to be a bare particular.

Bare particulars, entities that lack *any* properties, are controversial and potentially incoherent.⁸⁷

Second, we may think this paraphrase is inadequate: when I deny that Socrates exists, I do not seem to mean that Socrates has become a bare particular upon the consumption of hemlock.⁸⁸

A second general problem concerns existential claims regarding *fictional* entities. First, the Russell-Quine paraphrasing strategy for fictional characters makes many intuitively true claims false. Take ‘Rostam underwent seven trials.’ This is, *prima facie*, true – Rostam undergoes seven trials (in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*). But it is to be paraphrased as something like ‘There exists exactly one x that Rostamises, and some Rostamiser underwent seven trials’. This claim is false since *nothing* has this haecceistic property. Second, the view requires, for such paraphrases to work, that seemingly proper names like ‘Rostam’ are what Berto (2013: 92) calls ‘pseudo-names’, not really terms that pick out some entity but descriptions (like ‘the hero who underwent seven trials in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, ...’). This is, at least *prima facie*, objectionably revisionary of ordinary fictional discourse – when one uses ‘Rostam’, this is easily understood as a name being used to refer to a fictional object.

Finally, the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view is also plagued by problems concerning reference to apparent non-existents not only in language but also *in thought*. Consider intentional states, that is, mental states that have the feature of being directed towards some object. Intentionality is a common feature of mental states, often indicated in language by phrases like ‘thinks of’, ‘admires’, ‘believes’, and ‘imagines’.

⁸⁷ See Sellars (1952) for the incoherence worry.

⁸⁸ There are other proposed paraphrase strategies, but they all face strong objections. Importantly, even if they succeeded, since successful paraphrases are supposed to preserve the intuitive content and truth-value of the paraphrased sentences, we need an argument to privilege the paraphrases over the sentences being paraphrased. See Berto (2013: 40–55) for discussion.

De dicto intentional states are those whose content, in one's beliefs or thoughts, are propositions. For example, Adam believes *that Charlie does not like him* or Siavash fears *that Rostam will become angry*. *De re* intentional states directly concern an object: Ponce de Leon searched for *the fountain of youth*, the ancient Persians worshipped *Abura Mazda*, John admires *Gandalf*, and Anakin dreamt of *Tatooine*.

A perennial problem for the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view is that we seem to refer – in this intentional sense of ‘refer’ – to non-existent objects in *de re* intentional states *all the time*. Ponce de Leon was searching for *something*, though what he was searching for does not exist. But this is anathema to that view: if *there is* something Ponce was searching for, then it must exist.⁸⁹

A standard response is to see intentional objects as existing mental representations. But mental representations cannot have many properties that the objects to which we seem to stand in *de re* intentional relations to have (Berto 2013: 56–57). Take the intentional relation *x desires y*: Adam desires his friend Sarah. Take, next, the true sentence ‘There is some *x* that Adam desires, and *x* has a beautiful smile’. Where ‘*x*’ is Adam’s mental representation of Sarah, this looks false: Adam’s mental representation of Sarah’s beautiful smile does not itself have the property of *having a beautiful smile*. More generally, we might think that the very phenomenon of intentionality is highlighted by recognising that there is something distinct from our mental representations of that thing. It seems, for example, that you and I can intend *de re* Robert Pattinson through two different mental representations: Batman or Edward Cullen. We seem

⁸⁹ A problem for *de dicto* intentional states also arises on the view under discussion if one countenances Russellian propositions. For such propositions can have individual entities as their constituents. The true propositions that are the content of *de dicto* intentional states, like ‘Adam believes Rostam is a hero’, would thus seem to have Rostam – a non-existent object – as a constituent.

here to be intending *de re* the same entity – Robert Pattinson – which remains distinct from our representations of him. And this seems true even if what we are intending *de re* does not exist.⁹⁰

The success of the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view in satisfactorily resolving the paradox of non-being, then, is much more suspect than commonly assumed. This undercuts a strong motivation for the view. But it also reveals many of the challenges it faces in plausibly understanding existential claims, talk of fictional objects, and *de re* intentional states concerning apparent non-existents. These objections are not intended to show the view false; only to allow us to open the logical space for what is to come.

The alternative solution to the paradox is to reject the claim that ‘if one refers to something, then that thing must exist’ – that is, (P2). This is the strategy most associated with Alexius Meinong: there are some things which do not exist, but which we can quantify over, which have properties, and of which we can speak truthfully of. As he put it: ‘those who like paradoxical modes of expression could very well say: “There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects.”’ (Meinong 1904: 83). Call this,

(Meinongianism) There are non-existent objects which we can quantify over, refer to, which have properties, and which are the proper subjects of some true propositions.⁹¹

Meinongianism, first, avoids all the objections the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view above faces. Second, it preserves the surface grammar of ordinary existential claims as subject-predicate

⁹⁰ One might think that *de re* intentional relations are not ‘genuine’ relations because relations require the existence of their relata to obtain. But it is not clear why we should think this unless we *already assume* the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view of existence (see Brentano 1995, Prior 1971, and Searle 1983 for such claims, and Priest 2016: 60, fn. 7 for a pithy response).

⁹¹ As indicated in fn. 65, there are *many* forms of Meinongianism. ‘Neo-Meinongianism’ is commonly used to distinguish between Meinong’s own view and others that posit non-existent objects. For simplicity, I use ‘Meinongianism’.

form sentences and allows that ‘exists’ can function as a first-order predicate denoting a first-order property that ‘makes a difference’ to what it is ascribed to, indicating that it is not non-existent. Third, it preserves the intuitive truth-value of various claims that the received solution seems to get wrong. For example, ‘Rostam underwent seven trials’ is true, as are other tricky cases such as ‘the round square is round’, which the received view must paraphrase into a non-denoting description which would either lack a truth-value, be assigned some non-classical truth-value, or be false, when it seems intuitively to be true.⁹² Finally, and importantly, it also offers us a promising route to understanding the phenomenon of (*de re*) intentionality: positing non-existent objects as the relata to which we relate via intentional relations.

But is it not a contradiction to say that *there are* objects of which it is true that *there are no* such objects? It is *if* we take the quantifier phrase ‘there are’ to commit us to the *existence* of some object(s) of which we are then denying that they exist. ‘There is no object (such as x)’ is translated in first-order logic into $\neg(\exists y) (y = x)$, meaning ‘there is some object x such that there is no object’ becomes $(\exists y) \neg(\exists x) (y = x)$. Since we are talking about the same object, that last claim is equivalent to $(\exists x) \neg(x = x)$. So ‘there is something that does not exist’ is either a contradiction or entails a logical falsity.

If, however, we can make sense of quantifier phrases like ‘there are’ not committing us to the existence of something, but, rather, merely designating or ‘picking out’ something for discussion out of an unrestricted domain containing both existent and non-existent objects, then Meinong’s phrase is no contradiction. This is what Meinongians suggest.

⁹² I am not ignoring queries regarding ‘the round square is round’; I return to them below.

This has struck some as ‘*literally* gibberish or mere noise’ (Lycan 1979: 290). But, first, it is noteworthy that thinking quantification ontologically committing is a recent philosophical development absent from much of the history of philosophy. This is already evidence that the view is not *gibberish*.⁹³ But more importantly, the Meinongian view of quantification is motivated by the commonplace use of quantifier phrases across languages where no ontological commitment appears intended. Consider these English sentences,

- (A) I thought of something I would like to buy you for Christmas, but I couldn’t get it because it doesn’t exist.
- (B) Some characters in the Bible existed and some did not.
- (C) There are many Greek Gods who are easily angered. But they do not exist.
- (D) Some mythical winged horses can fly, and others are faster on land.
- (E) Some kings, like King Arthur, never existed.⁹⁴

Examples are legion. They strongly suggest that quantification is commonly used without any ontological commitment. To think quantification always so committing would render many seemingly true claims we make contradictions. Take (B). On the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view, this claim becomes ‘there exist characters in the Bible which exist and there exist characters in the Bible which do not exist’. The second conjunct (assuming ‘...do not exist’ is equivalent to ‘it is not the case that ... exist’) is a contradiction, leaving (B) false. But (B) not only seems true but is a consequence of claims we apparently know: namely, that some characters in the Bible existed whilst others did not (Crane 2013: 16–19). So, Meinong’s intentionally provocative phrase is

⁹³ See Priest (2008; 2016: 323–342) for helpful discussion of this.

⁹⁴ The first example is Priest’s (2016: 324) and the second Crane’s (2013: 17). There is also linguistic evidence that ‘exists’ can be used in wholly non-ontologically committing ways in English, see Azzouni (1998; 2010). Azzouni leans on our use of the word ‘exist’ to defend a view about what the necessary and sufficient conditions for existence are. For an argument against this strategy, which troubles his ‘deflationary nominalism’ project in Azzouni (2004), see (Akhlaghi-Ghaffarokh 2018).

understood as ‘*Some objects* are such that those objects do not exist’. This is no contradiction as ‘some’ is being used as a merely *particular* quantifier – picking out some particular x in the domain of quantification, some of which exist and others do not.⁹⁵

The attractive motivations for Meinongianism have spawned many versions. They agree that quantification is not ontologically committing. Most also agree that an object’s having properties does not require its existence.⁹⁶ But they disagree over (a) what non-existent objects there are, (b) what it amounts to for something to exist, (c) whether what it is for something to exist and to have being are the same, (d) whether some or all non-existent objects are mind-dependent or mind-independent, (e) whether non-existent objects literally have properties or merely ‘encode’ them, and, if they can, (f) what properties non-existent objects can have.⁹⁷

Despite this, they all agree that,

(Existence as First-Order) Existence is a first-order property of individuals.

(Existence as a Non-Blanket Property) Something’s having a first-order property of existence ‘makes a difference’ to it; it is not a trivial property of everything.

(Quantification as Ontologically Innocent) To quantify over something with phrases such as ‘some’, ‘there is’, ‘there are’ in natural language, and with the formal existential

⁹⁵ The formal plausibility of this has long been acknowledged. For details of ontologically unloaded quantifiers, and how Meinongians can define ontologically loaded quantifiers with the former and an existence predicate, see Priest (2016); Berto (2013: 69–73); and Berto & Plebani (2015: 101–103).

⁹⁶ Often called the ‘Principle of Independence’, this is Meinong’s (1904) distinction between the *Sein* (existential status) and the *Sosein* (possession of properties) of an object. I say ‘most’ because some Meinongians, as we’ll see, think that there are existence-entailing properties, but they agree that not all properties entail existence.

⁹⁷ See Berto & Plebani (2015: 99–112) and Tahko (2015: 20–27) for discussion.

quantifier, does not commit you to that thing's existence. Instead, ontological commitment is incurred by, for example, ascribing the property of existence.

There are other serious challenges for Meinongian theories which we shall encounter below with reference to Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism. But Meinongianism is neither absurd, immediately contradictory, nor unmotivated, and can avoid the (often ignored) problems of rival non-Meinongian views that reject non-existent objects.

Meta-ethicists who rule out serious discussion of views like irrealist cognitivism on the grounds of rejecting, without argument, the Meinongianism it depends upon are, thus, in need of argument. This should alarm meta-ethicists who explicitly or implicitly assume something like the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view of existence.

§3. Copp, Olson, and Why Meinongian Meta-Ethics Matters

§3.1. Copp on Irrealist Cognitivism

To see how Meinongian meta-ethical theories would have interesting consequences for meta-ethical debate, it is helpful to dispel some confusions about such views in the literature.

David Copp (2018) presses a semantic challenge of 'explaining both what moral judgments are *about*, and what their *truth conditions* are' against Parfit's non-realist cognitivism. He considers Parfit meeting this challenge by adopting Skorupski's Meinongianism and suggesting that what moral judgements 'are about' is non-existent reason relations which provide the truth-conditions Copp seeks. In Copp's words, irrealist cognitivism claims that moral and other normative properties,

[...] do not exist in any robust sense of ‘exist’, but nevertheless *there are* these properties in some not-merely-minimal sense of the relevant terms [...]. Skorupski contends that *there are* moral properties – or ‘reason relations’ – and *there are* moral truths – or truths about reason relations – but *there being* such things do not imply that they *exist* [...]. *There are* the things that are referred to by true claims of any kind, but not all things so referred to *exist*. Fictional entities and numbers do not exist, although *there are* such things. They are ‘irreal objects’. (Copp 2018: 585)

He concludes:

The fundamental problem with the Meinongian strategy is that it is unclear what distinguishes things that *exist* from things that do not exist but *are* [...]. The central weakness of this approach is the obscurity of its basic idea. (Copp 2018: 586–587)

Copp instructively misunderstands Meinongianism. First, Meinongianism *simpliciter* is not committed to a distinction between being and existence and that some entities *are* or *have being* whilst lacking existence. Copp takes *the* ‘basic idea’ of Meinongianism to be the ‘undeniably mysterious’ distinction between being and existence (Copp 2018: 585). This is false.

There *is* a form of Meinongianism that distinguishes being from existence, treating everything as enjoying being but only some enjoying existence. This is what Matti Eklund (2006a: 328) calls ‘modes-of-being’ Meinongianism and is defended by Edward N. Zalta (1988: 103–104). Such a view treats quantification as committing to the *being* but not the *existence* of that quantified over.

This is, however, not the most prominent form of Meinongianism *nor* is it a necessary condition of commitment to non-existent objects. As Eklund notes, Meinongianism tends to be understood in the above way ‘when the view is discussed by its foes’ (Eklund 2006a: 328). This is no surprise: such Meinongianism is easily made to sound ‘undeniably mysterious’.⁹⁸

It is now most common for Meinongians to understand being and existence to be identical but accept that some things lack being, that is, lack existence *simpliciter*. Eklund calls this ‘non-commitment’ Meinongianism: some or all candidate non-existents simply lack being or existence *at all*.⁹⁹ Such Meinongians include, crucial differences between them notwithstanding, Richard Routley (1980), Francesco Berto (2012), and Graham Priest (2016).

So Copp’s first mistake is confusing one form with all forms of Meinongianism. Meinongianism maintains that there are some objects that do not exist but to which we can refer and which have properties. One way to develop this idea is to distinguish between being and existence and treat everything as having being but only some as having existence. Another much more prominent way of doing so is to treat quantification as not ontologically committing *at all*, taking existence to be a non-blanket property, and taking non-existent objects to have properties and to be quantifiable over with a particular quantifier.

Copp’s second mistake: *irrealist cognitivism* is not committed to thinking that irreal reason relations – or any other non-existents – do not exist but, in some sense, *are*. Skorupski explicitly denies this:

⁹⁸ The pervasive assumption that Meinongianism suggests non-existent objects have being but lack existence is likely a consequence of most receiving their Meinongianism through Russell. Russell’s early Meinongianism (that he later repudiated) maintained that non-existent objects have being. This was no feature of Meinong’s (mature) view, nor is that distinction drawn by most contemporary Meinongians (see Priest 2016: 105–108).

⁹⁹ Such Meinongians are commonly called ‘noneists’.

I should emphasize that irrealty is not a shadowy form of being, where being itself is understood as an ontological status of which ‘being real’ or ‘existence’ is a species. The logical truth, ‘ $(\exists x) (x = x)$ ’—as in ‘Pierre = Pierre, therefore $(\exists x) (x = x)$ ’—makes no ontological claim at all. Nor is it that [the fictional] Pierre exists ‘in thought’ but not in ‘reality’. Pierre does not exist. (Skorupski 2010: 424)

Irreal objects have no ‘shadowy’ being. Instead, irrealist cognitivism suggests that to exist is to have causal standing and that not everything has causal standing, denies claims that irreal objects require truthmakers, and maintains that we can refer to and truthfully predicate properties of non-existent objects, including irreal reason relations. Reason relations do not exist – there *are* no reason relations. But, as fictional objects can fail to exist but be successfully referred to and have properties, so too, Skorupski claims, can reason relations.

A third mistake. Copp claims it is ‘unclear’ whether irrealist cognitivism is consistent with naturalism about reality – which he understands as ‘the view that, roughly, reality is exhausted by the natural’ (Copp 2018: 570) – because ‘it is unclear what it means for moral properties to *have being* [...] even though they do not exist’ (Copp 2018: 585). Again, first, this quoted claim is no feature of irrealist cognitivism nor most contemporary Meinongian theories. Second, Skorupski understands naturalism as the view that all *substantial* facts are natural facts, that is, all facts that constitute the world’s substantial properties, relations, and causal interactions are natural facts. Irrealist cognitivism is consistent with this view. Irrealist cognitivism accepts that everything which exists has causal standing but insists that there are nominal normative facts and truths which concern irreal reason relations.

Copp finally argues that irrealist cognitivism is either a form of moral and normative fictionalism or a mere notational variant of orthodox non-naturalism. His case for the former is

that Meinongian theories have often been developed to address problems that face truth-conditional semantics such as the problem of negative existentials. This, he continues, suggests that theories like irrealist cognitivism must treat ‘wrongness as on a par with fictional properties’ (Copp 2018: 586).

Copp acknowledges Skorupski’s distinction between mind-dependent and mind-independent (or ‘objective’) irreal objects. But he protests that this still leaves ‘moral properties [...] *metaphysically* akin to fictional properties in that they are irreal objects’ (Copp 2018: 586). This is too quick.

Suppose a non-Meinongian thinks that there are at least two types of extant abstract objects: fictional and mathematical entities. There is a sense in which one then thinks these ‘metaphysically akin’: they are abstract objects. But if someone objected that this similarity meant that one was committed to thinking that mathematical entities were also fictional objects – that they accepted some fictionalist mathematical nominalism – because they thought fictional and mathematical objects are both abstract objects, this would be a mistake.

Copp’s error is analogous. Irrealist cognitivism treats fictional properties and normative (including moral) properties as metaphysically akin in the sense that they are non-existent entities, analogous to the non-Meinongian above with their two types of extant abstract object. But to claim that this *suffices* to make irrealist cognitivism a form of fictionalism about normative properties and relations is to ignore the *metaphysical* distinction it posits between mind-dependent and mind-independent irreal objects, as it would be to make a similar charge in the case above.

Copp may respond that the irrealist cognitivist still owes us reason to deny that irreal reason relations are mind-dependent in the way that fictional objects appear to be. After all,

many apparent non-existents seem mind-dependent in some sense: purely fictional objects, the ideal posits of scientific theories and posits of false theories, and other ‘putatively real objects of thought’. This response raises important challenges to be discussed, but Copp’s fictionalism charge is inadequate.¹⁰⁰

If irrealist cognitivism avoids fictionalism, Copp worries that irrealist cognitivism becomes a reformulation of orthodox non-naturalism. The reason: ‘it is not clear what difference there is supposed to be between *objective irreality* and *existence*’ (Copp 2018: 586). It is not clear, however, why Copp thinks this is unclarified by Skorupski’s view: existence is the property of having causal standing, irreal objects are those to which we can refer and which enjoy properties but lack causal standing, and objective irreals are non-existent objects whose presence in the domain of quantification and/or whose properties do not depend upon epistemic agents. He finally puts this point in terms of it being unclear ‘in what sense something that does not exist can *have being*’ (Copp 2018: 586). Again, this is no feature of Skorupski’s view.

§3.2. Irrealist Cognitivism and Metaphysical Objections

We reach Copp’s last concern:

[...] it is not clear how [irrealist cognitivism] avoids familiar objections to orthodox non-naturalism. These objections seem to have nothing to do with whether moral properties exist or instead are merely ‘objectively irreal’. (Copp 2018: 586)

Shared by Jonas Olson (2018: 265–268), the worry is that *even if* the above concerns are mistaken, irrealist cognitivism does not evade metaphysical objections to standard non-

¹⁰⁰ I return to this issue in §4.3.

naturalism. Three such common objections are parsimony, supervenience, and queerness objections. *Pace* Copp and Olson, irrealist cognitivism – and Meinongian meta-ethical theories in general – can make a plausible case for evading them.

The general strategy: argue that metaphysical and ontological objections to irreducible reason relations (or other normative properties) are ultimately objections that concern the *existence* of such relations. Provided that we have independent reason to admit of non-existent objects, and irreducibly normative reason relations amongst them, irrealist cognitivism avoids such objections.

Parsimony objections concern (quantitative or qualitative) *ontological parsimony*.¹⁰¹ A standard formulation of the methodological principle they invoke is,

(Parsimony) *Ceteris paribus*, if T1 is more ontologically parsimonious than T2, then it is rational to prefer T1 to T2.

Ontological parsimony is commonly cashed out in terms of ontological commitment: x is an ontological commitment of theory T if and only if T entails that x exists. Ontological parsimony objections against normative non-naturalism suggest that some other meta-ethical theory is equal in every respect to non-naturalism *bar* being more ontologically parsimonious – because non-naturalism posits non-natural (substantial) facts, properties, and relations – so we should accept that other theory.

¹⁰¹ Quantitative parsimony concerns the *number* of entities posited; qualitative the number of *types* of entities. Some objections concern *ideological* parsimony, the number of, or number of types of, primitive terms in one's theory. Such objections raise no special problem for irrealist cognitivism, and it offers, as Meinongian theories do, accounts of the notions non-Meinongians often treat as primitive, such as existence and non-existence.

Irrealist cognitivism evades this objection by denying that reason relations exist. There are no substantive normative facts, properties, or relations. Reason relations are unreal objects and this does not preclude their being referred to or truthfully having properties predicated of them. Ontological parsimony objections target traditional non-naturalism because they maintain that normative phenomena *exist*.

This may appear a verbal trick. But if we take non-existent objects seriously, this suspicion is easily diagnosable – it is the lingering ‘prejudice for the actual’ in Meinong’s words or, in Skorupski’s terms the real or existent, that grips much of metaphysical theorising. The demand for a ‘simple’ or ‘parsimonious’ ontology is precisely that - a demand for admitting as few things (or types of things) into our ontology as possible. Irrealist cognitivism respects this demand.

We might rephrase parsimony objections by appeal to:

(Parsimony*) *Ceteris paribus*, if T1 posits fewer, or fewer types of, existent or non-existent entities than T2, then it is rational to prefer T1 to T2.

This would trouble irrealist cognitivism since it posits both existing and non-existing objects *and* different types of non-existents. However, first, it is unclear why we should accept (Parsimony*). Justifications for parsimony principles assume the relevant theories admit the *existence* of entities, so it is unclear what justification this principle enjoys (Baker 2016). But even if justified, notice that the parsimony objection now concerns the *more general* debate over whether we should accept non-existent objects. For if we should, then everything is *not* equal between irrealist cognitivism and, say, normative naturalism. And not only are there independent grounds for admitting non-existent objects, but Skorupski offers his own argument for why they

are required in the master argument above. Irrealist cognitivism, then, has a plausible response to parsimony objections.

Explaining the apparent supervenience of the normative on the non-normative has long troubled non-naturalism.¹⁰² Skorupski acknowledges supervenience as ‘somewhat mysterious’ and claims his view ‘eliminates’ supervenience because the relation that holds between the natural and the normative just is the reason relation (Skorupski 2010: 449). This suggestion does not depend upon Meinongianism. But, as we’ll see, its final plausibility does.

As Olson points out, Skorupski does not offer an ‘elimination’ of supervenience but, rather, a reduction of the supervenience relation to some *necessitation* relation we might call the ‘reason-making’ relation.¹⁰³ For example, if the property of being the fact that an action causes pain necessitates the property of being a reason not to perform some action, the thought is that, *necessarily*, the fact that an action causes pain has the property of being a reason not to perform an action *because* or *in virtue of* having the former property (Olson 2018: 267). This ‘in virtue of’ relation, Skorupski is suggesting, is the reason relation which he is reducing the ‘mysterious’ supervenience relation to.

So, irrealist cognitivism’s response to the supervenience objection depends upon whether irreducibly normative reason relations are metaphysically respectable or not. Enter, finally, queerness objections. Queerness objections to non-naturalism have taken many forms.¹⁰⁴ The most influential version now concerns irreducible normativity: in terms of reason relations, irreducibly normative ‘counting in favour of’ relations are those that ‘do not admit of naturalistic explanations in terms of human conventions’ (Olson 2018: 267), that is, in terms of either ‘facts

¹⁰² See Dreier (2019) for a recent overview.

¹⁰³ Skorupski (2010: 456–457) seems to acknowledge this.

¹⁰⁴ See Olson (2014: 79–138) and Shepski (2008) for discussion.

about what would promote satisfaction of A's desires, or facts about A's roles or engagement in rule-governed activities' (Olson 2014: 122). The objection is that such reason relations would be metaphysically too odd or 'queer' to admit of the existence of and so we should reject them.

Many a key has been furiously hit over whether 'queerness' concerns trouble non-naturalism. Olson stresses that this objection does not require that we already assume some form of naturalism about reality, claiming that we might think normative facts and properties queer 'because of their irreducible normativity' (Olson 2014: 86). The problem is supposedly 'at a bedrock metaphysical level' where 'it is difficult [...] to convince those who find nothing queer about irreducible normativity. And vice-versa.' We might think we face 'a stalemate, staring incredulously at each other' (Olson 2014: 136).

Let us try not to stare. There are three options for clarifying the queerness objection.

First, perhaps there is something about the nature of relations that precludes their being irreducibly normative. Neither Olson nor others argue for some view of the nature of relations that precludes their being 'counting in favour of' relations that are not subject to 'naturalistic explanations'. As Timothy Williamson (Forthcoming) argues, metaphysical theories of relations differ drastically amongst one another and if the metaphysical mystery here is to be found in the nature of relations, then those pushing this objection owe us an account of it.

Second, perhaps the very idea of an irreducibly normative reason relation is unintelligible or incoherent. This is too strong. Olson himself tells us what irreducibly normative reason relations would be: counting in favour of relations that are not reducible to the properties of actions concerning their being means to the satisfaction of some desire or their being in accord

with some rule or norm (Olson 2014: 136). Such relations are perfectly *intelligible* and involve no internal contradiction absent further argument.

This leaves a third option: whilst intelligible, what is queer is the suggestion that *there exist* any irreducibly normative reason relations. We might think this is what Olson means when he says: ‘Such irreducibly normative favouring relations appear metaphysically mysterious. How can *there be* such relations?’ (Olson 2014: 136, my emphasis). Olson is no Meinongian, so to read ‘there be’ as ‘exist’ is not uncharitable. Is the worry, then, that irreducibly normative reason relations, by being irreducibly normative, are too weird to *exist*?

Olson seems to deny this when claiming that ‘this kind of worry need not be premised on the idea that irreducibly normative [reason relations] have causal standing’ (Olson 2018: 267–268). But this is to ignore the general point here by focussing on Skorupski’s account of existence that Olson may find odd. The point is to say that *whatever* existence is, the queerness objection is that irreducibly normative relations are too weird to be the kind of thing that would exist, perhaps because all other relations we think exist are those that admit of ‘naturalistic explanations’.

And if *this* is the queerness objection, then irrealist cognitivism has an excellent response: ‘we agree, whatever existence is, reason relations *do not exist*’. Reason relations are irreal relations that hold between naturalistically respectable facts (like some action causing pain) and some action (like hitting someone), but such relations do not *themselves* exist. They, however, still have properties, like the property of *being a relation*, there are still true propositions concerning them, and we can refer to them through ontologically innocent quantification.

One might think some strangeness remains, or perhaps even worsens if you find non-existent objects queer. But this makes the queerness objection stand or fall with the more general debate over whether we should accept Meinongianism at all, which, again, any form of Meinongianism – including Skorupski’s irrealist cognitivism – argues we have independent reason to do. So, irrealist cognitivism has a plausible response, unavailable to non-Meinongian non-naturalists, to the irreducible normativity-based queerness objection.

It may seem objectionable to think that some relations that do not exist tell us what considerations count in favour of, say, what actions to perform. But why would it be more plausible for reason relations to tell us what considerations count in favour of what if they *existed*? If, for example, existence amounts to causal standing, why would reason relations being causally efficacious make it more plausible that they indicated what counted in favour of what? Unless one provides some account of existence that makes this objection forceful, we might think, again, that it is merely the prejudice in favour of what exists being vocalised.

§3.3. Why Meinongian Meta-Ethics Matters

There are, thus, five reasons to take Skorupski’s irrealist cognitivism, and Meinongian meta-ethical theories generally, seriously.

First, when these theories understand existence as causal standing – or some other property arguably possessed only by the entities natural science investigates – they offer a way to accept irreducibly normative properties and relations consistently with naturalism about reality. As we’ve seen, Skorupski’s irrealist cognitivism achieves this.

Second, they offer a plausible general strategy for defanging specific metaphysical and ontological objections that have plagued traditional non-naturalism. I’ve argued this is so with

Skoruspki's irrealist cognitivism, on grounds reproducible by any Meinongian meta-ethical theory, for parsimony, supervenience, and queerness objections.

Third, they offer a way to develop the much-discussed but poorly understood intuition had by the non-naturalistically inclined: the 'just-too-different' intuition.¹⁰⁵ The thought: normative properties and relations have some feature that they would lack if they were reduced to natural facts like desire-satisfaction facts or conventional facts. Often, this thought is developed by appeal to their 'to-be-doneness', 'categoricity' (Fitzpatrick 2014: 575–576), or 'normativity' (Enoch 2010: 104–108).

But there is a way to understand this intuition that remains unexplored. The suggestion: normative properties and relations are 'too different' from natural existents *precisely because* they are non-existent objects that concern reason relations that do not and could not exist. As Graham Priest puts it, "The difference between existence and non-existence is about as great as can be!" (Priest 2016: 135). Understood this way, we also preserve the normativity Enoch fears losing, for the 'to-be-doneness' non-naturalists worry over may be a property that what exists cannot have. Those who insist that their intuition concerns, say, the 'to-be-doneness' of the normative, the Meinongian can agree but say that this may just be intuitive evidence of the non-existence of, say, relation relations. Of course, there are intuitive differences between reason relations and other non-existents (such as fictional objects). But these may be understandable in terms of differing qualitative properties – like normative properties or lack thereof – that they possess and not, for example, a difference in existence or non-existence.

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is David Enoch's (2010: 80, 103–109) and the sentiment is shared by, *inter alios*, Fitzpatrick (2008; 2014); Parfit (2011; 2017); and Dancy (2006). See Paakkunainen (2018) and Copp (2020) for discussion.

Fourth, such theories can do all the above whilst avoiding the objections other views face if they (implicitly or otherwise) adopt the meta-ontological claims in the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view of existence. Moreover, if normative properties and relations are plausibly understood as objective, irreal objects, then this may even strengthen an abductive argument *for Meinongianism simpliciter*. Metaphysicians outside of meta-ethics should, thus, take note too.

Finally, such theories can achieve the above in non-ad hoc ways by appeal to whatever the more general motivations for non-existent objects are supposed to be. Of course, the theory will have to explain why reason relations are non-existent *and* objective or non-mind-dependent. But if it can do that, then such a theory would be very attractive indeed.

§4. Three Objections

§4.1. Causation and Existence

According to irrealist cognitivism,

(Causal Condition) x exists if and only if x ‘has causal standing’.¹⁰⁶

Whatever exists – is real – ‘has the power of acting or being acted upon’ (Skorupski 2010: 426). This, Skorupski insists, is not a *definition* of existence. He sees no logical contradiction in ‘some x is such that x is causally inert and x exists’. Rather, it is a *synthetic* identity claim. Combined with Meinongianism, this seems to allow Skorupski to respect the ‘robust sense of

¹⁰⁶ Sometimes called ‘the Eleatic Principle’ after the Eleatic Stranger in Plato’s *The Sophist* (247d-e), or ‘Alexander’s Dictum’ after Samuel Alexander who claimed that ‘to be is to have causal powers’ (Alexander 1920: 8).

reality' that Russell claimed Meinongianism offended.¹⁰⁷ On closer inspection, however, things are less clear.

For what does Skorupski mean by 'causal standing'? Given his insistence that irrealist cognitivism is consistent with naturalism more generally, perhaps he intends that notion 'internal to empirical natural science', that is, the notion we invoke when discussing causation in the physical world (Skorupski 2010: 426). But that is not so:

In considering the causal condition we should understand 'cause' widely, not restricting it to our modern notion of a cause as something of which an intelligible scientific account can in principle be given. [...] If noumena produce phenomena in a non-natural way that lies beyond the scope of science then the causal condition says that noumena are real. Equally if God creates the world by some non-natural act of will, God is real; if Platonic forms somehow generate or produce or give rise to sensible appearances they are real [...] if some normative realists believe that normative facts cause normative beliefs by a scientifically inexplicable productive relation, their view does not fall to the causal condition. (Skorupski 2010: 427)

Skorupski here distinguishes between a *wide* and a *narrow* reading of 'cause'. The latter concerns causal powers and their exercising by the physical. The former concerns some broader notion that is supposed to encompass what he elsewhere calls 'non-natural causality' (Skorupski 2010: 414).

¹⁰⁷ Priest (2016: xxvii–xxviii) offers this ironic point whilst endorsing the view that 'to exist is to have the potential to interact causally'.

This might seem to merely be capturing the epistemic possibility that something non-natural (e.g., God) could have (narrow) causal powers. However, he also claims that someone might think normative facts could have some ‘scientifically inexplicable productive’ power, and his other examples include those who think ‘God, universals, and things in themselves’ may be thought to ‘produce the world of space, time, and causality, even though they do not cause it in our usual sense’ (Skorupski 2010: 426).

Skorupski seems to be invoking some metaphysical *determination* relations that do not require something to be physical to be able to stand as relata, and where that non-physical thing can *make it the case* that some fact obtains. Perhaps Skorupski wants to allow for the epistemic possibility, as some do in the grounding literature, that there is a determination relation akin to causality except that it holds between natural or non-natural facts. This broad sense of ‘cause’ allows that *any* fact could be a ‘cause’ of another, even if that cause is non-physical. Including ‘narrow’ causes amongst all determination relations, Skorupski may intend,

(Causal Condition*) x exists if and only if x can stand in or produce a determination relation.

One advantage of (Causal Condition*) is that it answers Jonas Olson’s objection that Skorupski misunderstands traditional non-naturalism. Olson suggests that Skorupski takes non-naturalist realists to think that normative facts, properties, and relations ‘are causally efficacious, and that normative judgment involves receptive awareness of normative facts to which normative intuitions are causally linked’ (Olson 2018: 266). Reading ‘cause’ narrowly, as Olson notes, this is not the view of most non-naturalist realists.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Graham Oddie (2005) is one exception.

But read *widely*, non-naturalist realists all accept that the normative can stand in determination relations. For example, David Enoch (2019) argues that moral principles (say, that it is wrong to gratuitously harm) in conjunction with natural facts (that some action would involve gratuitous harm) *metaphysically ground* other normative moral facts (that some particular action would be morally wrong). Skorupski is right to think that non-naturalists take normative facts, properties, and relations as ‘causally efficacious’ in his ‘non-natural causality’ sense of standing in determination relations with other entities.

But (Causal Condition*) generates two serious problems for Skorupski. First, recall that he posits two types of mind-dependent unreal objects: fictional objects and ‘putative reals’. The latter include, for example, witches, *elan vitale*, and frictionless planes – things which we thought existed but do not. That these things are in the domain of quantification at our world depends somehow upon us: had we not believed that witches existed, they would not be ‘putative reals’ at our world. And what properties they have depend upon us and how we have conceived of them too – the frictionless plane is frictionless because we have conceived of it as such.

The objection: why not think reason relations are mind-dependent *putative reals* and not, as Skorupski believes, *objective irrealis*? That is, even if there are non-existent objects, why not think that reason relations are one type of entity which we think exist but, in fact, do not, as opposed to objective irrealis which obtain between facts and what they count in favour of regardless of anything to do with agents? Skorupski’s reply:

That view would make sense if we thought of [reason relations] as putative attributes. There would then be a significant question about whether there actually are any such attributes, or indeed could be. But we do not think this. (Skorupski 2010: 429)

Skorupski cannot make this response if he accepts (Causal Condition*). For now ‘putative attributes’ does not concern that which has causal standing in the *narrow* sense of ‘cause’. Instead, it concerns properties or features that *either* have such ‘narrow’ causal standing *or* can stand in or produce some metaphysical determination relation like grounding. And, *prima facie*, normative properties would be putative attributes in *that* sense. So, on this reading, Skorupski undermines his own case for the *objective* irreality of reason relations.

Worse, Skorupski would now be claiming that reason relations, as non-existents, cannot stand in metaphysical determination relations. But this means that no normative fact can make it the case that some other normative fact obtains. If so, then, for example, the fact that an action is cruel cannot make it the case that it is wrong, or general normative facts like it being wrong to harm the innocent cannot be (partly) that in virtue of which some instance of harming an innocent person is wrong. These are claims Skorupski should accept.¹⁰⁹

But couldn’t Skorupski distinguish between metaphysical determination relations that obtain between what exists and some more deflationary notion applicable to irreal objects and nominal properties and facts? For example, perhaps causation and notions like grounding hold between substantive facts but some deflationary ‘because’ relation (akin to his deflationism about truth-making) is that which the above examples concern: it is wrong to harm a particular innocent person, in part, because it is wrong to harm innocent people.

Even if this is plausible, the challenge remains of explaining why we should think that irreal reason relations are objective irreals as opposed to mind-dependent putative reals. For

¹⁰⁹ Wouter Floris Kalf (2021) raises a similar objection to Scanlon (2014).

now, his opponents can suggest that we do think reason relations (and other normative properties) *are* the kinds of entities that can stand in, for example, grounding relations and so exist, whilst they would not have suggested that reason relations are the kind of thing which we think would have [narrow] causal powers.

To block this, Skorupski seems forced into accepting (Causal Condition). But now Olson's objection reappears. For understanding 'cause' narrowly, Skorupski is simply mistaken in thinking that most traditional non-naturalists think normative facts, properties, and relations are causally acted upon or cause anything.

This mistake is a problem for Skorupski. For there is an objection to Meinongianism, owed to David Lewis (1990), that threatens to show that any form of Meinongianism collapses under translation into a form of extremely permissive Platonism that accepts the Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view above. This objection is particularly pressing since it sharpens Copp's and Olson's worries that irrealist cognitivism is not distinct from non-naturalist realism properly understood.

When a Meinongian says '*x* is an object' (that is, *x* is present in the domain of quantification), the Platonist says '*x* exists'. When the Meinongian says '*x* exists', the Platonist can understand this as '*x* is concrete', given the Meinongian understands existence as some property that only concrete objects have (like causal powers). This looks like a complete translation manual of Meinongianism into Platonism, and, the objection goes, reason to think that Meinongianism is just a very permissive form of Platonism that re-phrases ontological

debate in unfamiliar terms. If so, then, Skorupski's view may look like no advance on standard non-naturalism couched in Platonist language.¹¹⁰

Skorupski anticipates this. He replies, first, that the translation breaks down because his opponents will likely deny the existence of what Skorupski accepts as non-existent objects (like fictional objects). This is unpersuasive, since many can and do accept the existence of such entities.¹¹¹ His second response: irrealist cognitivism is compatible with naturalism about reality whilst Platonism is not, and so they remain distinct. Skorupski continues, however, that the kind of non-naturalist realism he opposes 'is best understood as the view that there are substantial [reason] relations about which there are substantive facts' (Skorupski 2010: 440). But when 'substantive' means 'subvenes a causal sensitivity or power', when 'causal' is read narrowly, this is, again, not what such realists believe. We need more from irrealist cognitivism to precisify the distinction between it and non-naturalist realism. As the Meinongianism literature indicates and we'll see, this is best done with so-called comprehension or characterisation principles for non-existents. This takes us to the second problem for irrealist cognitivism.

§4.2. Comprehension Principles

The most influential objections to Meinongianism come from Russell and Quine. Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism has particular difficulty meeting them. They arise from two questions for any form of Meinongianism.

First question: *what non-existent objects are there and what properties can they have?*

¹¹⁰ Also see Burgess & Rosen (1997: 224) and Hale (2007: §3.2) for the objection, and Priest (2016: 152, 198–206) for responses.

¹¹¹ For example, van Inwagen (1977).

Meinongians tend to answer this question by appeal to comprehension principles that tell us what non-existents there are and what properties they enjoy.¹¹²

Russell and Quine read a view out of Meinong, which he may not have held, that appeals to what Terence Parson's (1979b; 1980) calls the 'Unrestricted Comprehension Principle' (UCP). Letting 'Ax' stand for any property or condition (a 'describable set of properties' (Zalta 1983: 6)), and 'x' some free variable,

(UCP) For any condition Ax with free variable x, some object satisfies Ax.

The thought behind (UCP): first, whatever properties we consider, they characterise some object. Second, that the object 'genuinely has' these properties – they are not somehow 'pseudo-instantiated' by the object. Take *x is a wizard*, *x slayed the Balrog*, and *x expelled Saruman from the Order of Wizards*. If 'Ax' stands for the conjunction of these predicates, then the (UCP) entails that there is an object characterised by Ax. We can call it Gandalf, *g*. Gandalf thus has the aforementioned properties indicated by these predicates: *Ag*.¹¹³

Russell (1905a; 1905b; 1907) argues that the (UCP) leads to disaster. First, the objection from inconsistency. Since 'Ax' can stand for any condition on properties, it can take inconsistent properties. If $Ax = 'x \text{ is a square and } x \text{ is not a square}'$, then, by (UCP), there is some (non-existent) object that has that property. This object is both a square and not a square. Contradiction.

¹¹² For helpful overview, see Berto (2013: 115–151) and Reischer (2019).

¹¹³ We get unique objects by adding a version of Leibniz's Law to the theory. For example: *x* and *y* are the same object if and only if they have exactly the same properties (Berto 2013: 87).

Second, the objection from triviality. The objection suggests that (UCP) allows us to prove *a priori* the existence of anything. This is because the property of existence itself can be packed into 'Ax'. If Ax = 'x is made of gold and x is a mountain and x exists' then, by (UCP), there is an object that meets Ax and, thus, there exists a gold mountain.

As Graham Priest (2016: xix, 83) notes, the (UCP) is even worse than Russell realised. For the (UCP) allows us to prove *anything*. Let Ax be 'x = x and B', where 'B' stands for any sentence. By the (UCP), some object, *a*, is such that *a* = *a* and B. By Conjunction Elimination, we get B. So, the (UCP) would render Meinongianism logically trivial, that is, as proving anything.

Second question: *what are the identity conditions for non-existent objects?*

A well-known Quinean slogan is 'no entity without identity' (Quine 1969a: 23). Quine in discussing his 'possible fat man in that doorway', famously suggests that there is no plausible way to individuate non-existent objects (Quine 1948: 23). If so, he thinks, the idea of non-existent objects is incoherent.

We might doubt whether there are clear conditions of individuation for any objects.¹¹⁴ But most Meinongians instead suggest that their comprehension principles provide identity conditions for non-existents. For example, the (UCP) suggests that the identity conditions of non-existents are provided by their characterising properties. But, as we've seen, the (UCP) is hopeless.

¹¹⁴ Routley (1982: 163) provides his own comical, parody-retort to Quine by reflecting on the unclear identity conditions of clouds.

A striking feature of Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism is that it lacks *any* comprehension principle for non-existents. Without one, we have neither a procedure to ascertain what non-existent objects there are, nor their identity conditions. Instead, Skorupski provides us only his taxonomy of irreal objects and his anchoring condition which tells us that any reference to a non-existent must be '*anchored by their relations to the real*' (Skorupski 2010: 425).

Skorupski might think his anchoring condition absolves him of the need of a comprehension principle. For example, perhaps some attempts to discuss non-existents fail because our discussion of them is not appropriately related to what exists. Take the condition '*...is a famous fictional detective who fictionally lives in Fulham*'. Unlike '*...is a famous fictional detective who lives in Baker Street*', *prima facie* no object meets the first condition.

But, first, suppose Adam falsely believes that there is a fictional detective who fictionally lives in Fulham. We can then anchor our reference to said character with the description '*the fictional detective x that Adam falsely believes fictionally lives in Fulham*'. Thus, we have a putative fictional character, *prima facie* another irreal object. Second, the suggestion that some descriptions will fail to characterise an irreal object fails to provide a general procedure to ascertain what non-existents there are, offering no guidance in plausible disagreements over whether certain descriptions are met in particular cases. Third, and most importantly, Skorupski's insistence on 'anchoring' talk of irreals to what exists, such that sometimes a description used to characterise an irreal object may fail, amounts only to a denial of (UCP). It does not tell us *why* irrealist cognitivism rejects (UCP) – that is, why, in general, descriptions can fail to characterise objects – or what it accepts instead, nor does it offer identity conditions for non-existents.

'Anchoring' is a metaphor. Some metaphors are illuminating. The problem here is that the condition built from this metaphor is *maximally* permissive. The condition says: 'The only

condition that thought and discourse about any topic must satisfy is that we know and can communicate to each other what we are talking about' (Skorupski 2010: 423). This is a *very* easy condition to meet. For example, one can anchor discussion of irreal with inconsistent properties in the actual. Talk of the round square can be made mutually intelligible by anchoring it in talk of actual circular or square objects.

We can even anchor talk of *reason relations* with *incompatible* properties in the actual substantive facts they count in favour of or against. For example, I can anchor talk of a reason relation that both decisively counts in favour of some action and decisively counts against that same action by reference to the relevant action. You can know and I can communicate to you what I am talking about, even if we want to deny that any reason relation can meet this condition (as we may with the round square). This is a serious problem; no Meinongian meta-ethical theory should allow for this.

Skorupski might reply that whilst we can talk about the round square, *being round* and *being square* are *existence-entailing* properties. So, nothing exists that has both the property of being a square and not a square. Instead, this non-existent object merely has the properties of being *supposed* to be round and square. Thus, there is no non-existent round square.

The existence-entailing and non-existence-entailing property distinction is sometimes employed in Meinongian theories (or those broadly sympathetic to it).¹¹⁵ Noteworthy, however, the distinction is mostly motivated by appeal to intuitive examples. Even granting the distinction, this generates a problem because *being round* and *being square* are not universally seen as existence-entailing by those who accept the distinction. Priest, for example, argues that *being circular* might

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Priest (2016); Berto (2013: 145–151); and Crane (2013).

seem existence-entailing because it imputes spatial properties. Geometric figures, he continues, however, like circles, are round. Geometric figures are, *prima facie*, abstract objects outside of space and time, and so *being circular* is not existence-entailing (Priest 2016: 275).

Moreover, without some explication and defence, appeal to this distinction offers no *general* way out of the problems outlined above. Nor does it clearly resolve the *reason relation* case. For example, do any reason relations that we can anchor talk of possessing contradictory properties have any existence-entailing properties? Presumably not on Skorupski's view. But then coherent, anchored talk of irreal reason relations with contradictory properties remains.

So, irrealist cognitivism is at the very least consistent with (UCP) and, if so, faces Russell's objections (or, worse, logical triviality). It also fails to resolve Quine's question about the identity conditions for non-existents. But all is not lost. Irrealist cognitivism may try to adopt a comprehension principle advocated by other contemporary Meinongian theories. I cannot offer a complete evaluation of these here. Instead, I shall argue that the adoption of any is difficult, at best, for Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism.

A rough start: precisifying what properties irreal objects can enjoy in conjunction with the existence-entailing/non-existence-entailing distinction. For example, Tim Crane (2013) argues that irreal objects only have *pleonastic* properties which he understands, with two exceptions, as *representation-dependent* properties.¹¹⁶ That is, 'properties that depend on the fact that the object is being represented in some way: in thought, language, pictures, and so on' (Crane 2014: 68). As Priest adds, we can understand this view as suggesting that the properties of non-existents are grounded in 'the representation actions of cognitive agents' (Priest 2016: 276).

¹¹⁶ The exceptions, unimportant here, are non-existence and self-identity (Crane 2014: 68–69, 165).

Skorupski's irrealist cognitivist cannot follow Crane. For whilst Skorupski accepts that the properties of non-existent fictional and putatively real objects depend in some important way on cognitive agents, he explicitly denies this of reason relations. They are, again, *objective* and *mind-independent* irreals, many of the true claims regarding which do not depend upon cognitive agents.

Now, most Meinongian theories reject (UCP) by offering a comprehension principle that denies either (a) that whatever properties we consider, they characterise some object, or (b) that the object 'genuinely has' – doesn't 'pseudo-instantiate' – these properties.¹¹⁷

Nuclear Meinongianism rejects (a).¹¹⁸ It distinguishes between two types of properties: *nuclear* and *extranuclear*.¹¹⁹ The thought is to restrict the class of conditions, Ax , to include only predicates standing for *nuclear* properties, which are taken to be those that characterise objects. Let a 'nuclear condition' be one that is composed only of predicates designating nuclear properties. Then, the Nuclear Comprehension Principle is,

(NCP) For any nuclear condition Ax with free variable x , some object satisfies Ax .

Clarifying 'nuclear properties' is the challenge. It does not help that the nuclear/extranuclear distinction is often treated as primitive. Terence Parsons, however, does provide examples: 'is blue', 'is tall', 'kicked x ', 'was kicked by x ', 'kicked y ', 'is golden', and 'is a mountain' are alleged nuclear predicates denoting nuclear properties (Parsons 1980: 22–23). He offers four types of extranuclear predicate: ontological ('exists', 'is fictional'), modal ('is possible',

¹¹⁷ The first two of which below are inspired by Meinong's pupil Ernst Mally (1912).

¹¹⁸ Prominent defenders include Parsons (1980); Routley (1980); and Jacquette (1996). The terminology is Findlay's (1963).

¹¹⁹ Sometimes also called *assumptible* or *characterising* properties (Berto 2013: 116).

‘is impossible’), intentional (‘is thought about by x ’, ‘is worshipped by someone’), and technical (‘is complete’, ‘is inconsistent’).

(NCP) offers a resolution to Russell’s triviality objection.¹²⁰ Existence becomes an extranuclear property denoted by an extranuclear predicate ‘exists’. Whilst there is a golden mountain (since, when ‘ Ax ’ is ‘ x is a mountain and x is gold’, (NCP) entails some object has those properties), there is no *existing* golden mountain because ‘exists’ is an extranuclear predicate and so cannot characterise an object. This avoids Priest’s worry too, as we cannot simply insert any claim into ‘ Ax ’. Finally, it offers a criterion of identity for non-existents: x and y are identical if and only if they exemplify the same nuclear properties.¹²¹

There are, at least, two serious challenges for irrealist cognitivism adopting (NCP). The first are charges of ad hoc-ness and obscurity often levelled against the nuclear/extranuclear distinction. Defenders offer no principle delineating the class of nuclear properties and this leaves many thinking ‘that the class has been gerrymandered to avoid problems’ (Priest 2016: 83). If the demystification of appeal to non-existents, offered to avoid fatal objections, invokes an unexplained distinction, trouble remains. Second, even if we grant the distinction *arguendo*, much work remains to explain how the distinction maps onto normative properties and relations. What, for example, are the plausible nuclear conditions that denote the properties which characterise the reason relations? This is not obvious, and we would want assurance that irreal reason relations could not be characterised by inconsistent properties.¹²²

¹²⁰ It is disputed whether (NCP) resolves violations of the law of non-contradiction entirely as we seem, for example, to still have round squares that are both round and not round; see Reischer (2019: §5.4).

¹²¹ This criterion entails that exactly one object satisfies any given nuclear condition.

¹²² The view would obviously inherit other objections to nuclear Meinongianism; see Berto (2013: 125–128) for discussion.

Dual-copula Meinongianism rejects (b).¹²³ The distinction here concerns two kinds of predication corresponding to two ways in which an object can relate to its properties. The first is non-revisionary and the other novel. Suppose one claims that x is P or x has P . The suggestion is that ‘is’ and ‘has’ are ambiguous in ordinary language. They might mean either, first, that an object x *exemplifies* P (the usual sense of ‘is’ when we say ‘the rose is red’) or, second, that x *encodes* P , where this is the novel posited sense in which non-existent objects have properties that characterise them without exemplifying them.

This distinction is supposedly primitive. Concrete objects are taken to exemplify properties but encode none. Any object that encodes some property or properties are labelled abstract, where this means they are neither mental representations nor spatio-temporally located objects. Abstract objects that encode properties do not exist, and so they exemplify the property of being non-existent. This generates the Dual Copula Comprehension Principle,

(DCCP) For any condition Ax with free variable x , some abstract object encodes exactly Ax .

This principle offers a criterion of identity for non-existents: x and y are the same (abstract) object just when they encode exactly the same properties. With (DCCP), this entails that each bundle of properties corresponds to a unique abstract object encoding them. Russell’s inconsistency objection is dealt with by taking impossible objects, like the round square, to be abstract objects which encode properties that cannot all be co-exemplified. Since they merely encode but do not exemplify such properties, contradiction seems avoided. So, the properties of *existing*, *being golden*, and *being a mountain* are co-encoded by an object that cannot co-exemplify

¹²³ Prominent defenders include Rapaport (1978) and Zalta (1983; 1988). I follow Zalta’s terminology and formulation of the view.

them. In the ordinary sense of 'is', there 'is' no golden mountain, though in the encoding sense there 'is'.

There are two problems for irrealist cognitivism in appealing to (DCCP). The first is that its consistency with irrealist cognitivism is unclear. Skorupski nowhere admits of an ambiguity in the copula 'is' and writes as if, in any sense of 'has', irreal objects have the (nominal) properties truthfully ascribed to them (even if some do mind-independently and others not). Second, as prominent defender Edward Zalta admits, the encodes/exemplifies distinction has a 'rather vague character' (Zalta 1983: 38). The motivating thought behind the view is positing an ambiguity in the copula 'is' that has eluded all non-Meinongian users of 'is', despite our recognising other ambiguities like the 'is' of identity and that of predication. Skorupski would incur a great burden to explain this distinction beyond mere appeals to examples of its use, before employing it in the normative domain too. Berto and Plebani aptly raise here Kripke's famous injunction: 'one had better not postulate ambiguities just in order to avoid troubles, for any trouble can be avoided that way' (Berto & Plebani 2015: 112).

Modal Meinongianism neither restricts the type of properties that can characterise an object nor posits a distinction in how objects can relate to their properties.¹²⁴ Instead, it understands characterisation as involving reference to both possible and *impossible* worlds, whilst taking some properties to be existence-entailing and others not. Crucially, some objects with existence-entailing properties will have these properties at other (sometimes impossible) worlds. Take their Qualified Comprehension Principle,

(QCP) For any condition Ax with free variable x , some object satisfies Ax *at some world*.

¹²⁴ The label is Berto's (2011; 2013), himself a prominent defender. The most influential defender is Graham Priest (2016).

The key insight here is taking the possession of properties by non-existent objects to be *modally* qualified. When I consider the fictional Rostam and his characterising properties, he *really* has these properties. Some such properties, like *having fired an arrow*, might entail existence. But (QCP) allows that Rostam only need have these properties *at some world*, and so, whilst a non-existent fictional object at our world, Rostam has these and other existence-entailing properties at those worlds that realise the story of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.¹²⁵

If we characterise a round square with the condition ' x is round and x is a square' for ' Ax ' above, then some object satisfies this condition at some world and has those properties. But (QCP) does not require that the world that satisfies that condition is the *actual* world. The view relies upon relegating such property-satisfaction to *impossible* worlds, worlds impossible by the laws of classical logic (ensuring that the law of non-contradiction is preserved at our world). The inconsistency charge looks met. Russell and Priest's triviality worries are similarly met: the existence feature of the golden mountain may be satisfied by the golden mountain, though it need not be at the actual world, nor need any arbitrary claim one inserts into ' Ax ' (which might obtain only at impossible worlds). Finally, the view offers a *general* criterion of identity for existent *or* non-existent objects: x and y are the same object if and only if they have the same properties at each world.¹²⁶

The trouble with the existence-entailing/non-existence entailing distinction, however, re-emerges for irrealist cognitivism if it adopts (QCP). Berto and Priest think their distinction

¹²⁵ Priest (2016: 83–84) aims to provide a uniform treatment of *de re* intentional states. The objects we characterise when representing them have those properties, though not necessarily at the actual world, but at some world (partly) described by the relevant representation.

¹²⁶ As Priest (2016: 88) notes, this criterion must exclude properties embedding identity to avoid becoming trivial, and he excludes extensionally impossible worlds too. The formal details provided by Priest are summarised in Berto (2013: 179–180).

common-sensical as opposed to the artificial-sounding distinctions of nuclear and dual-copula Meinongianism. This is unclear at best, especially since, whilst Berto grants the distinction is ‘merely intuitive’ (Berto 2013: 150), disagreement arises over what the intuitive cases of such properties really are. Moreover, the modal dimension of the view problematises this further. For example, if an object truthfully has an existence-entailing property, then why not think it has it at *all* (metaphysically possible) worlds? If it is true that Rostam killed Sohrab, and if *a kills y* is an existence-entailing relation, then why not think Rostam exists at this world too?

Second, adopting (QCP) would generate a serious problem for irrealist cognitivism. The characterising properties of non-existent reason relations, whatever they are, are met at some world. But why think that they are met at any *metaphysically possible* world? If all it takes to characterise a non-existent object is the satisfaction of some characterising condition at some world, this is unclear. Worse, why not think that the characterising condition(s) for reason relations are met only at *impossible* worlds, making them impossible objects? This opens the door to an error theory irrealist cognitivism denies.¹²⁷

§4.3. Domains of Quantification: A Dilemma

Meinongian theories can be distinguished into *realist* and *anti-realist* versions. Realist versions are often associated with a constant-domain semantics. These suppose the domain of quantification – the total of all to which we can refer to and think about, existent or not – is the same across all worlds. These views take non-existent objects to not have their non-existence depend on cognitive agents and so, for example, Sherlock Holmes is in the domain of quantification at all worlds with or without Arthur Conan Doyle.

¹²⁷ Irrealist cognitivism would also have to allow that it is metaphysically possible that, for example, fictional objects exist. Skorupski (2010: 425) denies this.

Anti-realist views, alternatively, often adopt a variable-domain semantics. These treat the domain of quantification as different across (at least some) worlds. Such a view takes non-existent objects to, in some way, depend upon cognitive agents. For example, one might think that the presence of Sherlock Holmes in the domain of quantification at our world in some way depends upon cognitive agents (Arthur Conan Doyle, those of us who think about Holmes, *inter alios*).¹²⁸

Skorupski does not offer a semantics for non-existents, and explicitly warns against reading any metaphysics out of our semantics (Skorupski 2010: 421–422; 2017: 598, 601). Whilst our semantics often do not mandate specific metaphysical commitments, our semantic commitments and our metaphysical ones are not as divorced as Skorupski repeatedly states. One needs to provide some interpretation of their semantic commitments. And if, for example, one holds either of the realist or anti-realist views above, one would hope that there was a semantic regimentation of their view available to clarify their commitments.

Nevertheless, these options raise a question for Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism: is the domain of quantification constant or variant across worlds? The view faces pressure to take each option. Both, I argue, generate significant problems for irrealist cognitivism.

The motivation for irrealist cognitivism to adopt a constant-domain, 'realist' view of all non-existent objects is that it can insulate reason relations from objections that concern how reason relations might appear, *pace* Skorupski, to, on his view, somehow depend upon cognitive agents. For example, Kurt Sylvan worries that it seems hard to explain how we can gain normative knowledge through spontaneity and convergence unless one accepts 'a cognition-

¹²⁸ Both semantics are formally viable. See Priest (2016: Chapter 1 and Chapter 14 respectively) for details.

dependent, constructivist account' of reason relations (Sylvan 2016: 619). Skorupski replies by reiterating his general view and insistence on the cognition-independence of reason relations (Skorupski 2017: 596–599).

This is hard to understand *unless* the domain of quantification and the irreal objects that inhabit it is fixed across worlds. For then we have a sharpening of 'cognition-' and 'mind-independence' that Skorupski does not offer: x is cognition or mind-independent just when the presence of x in the domain of quantification in no way depends upon agents. And if reason relations are present in the domain of quantification at all worlds, regardless of anything to do with agents, then given his assumption that we have normative knowledge, the objects of such knowledge are 'cognition-independent' reason relations.

Three problems beset irrealist cognitivism if it accepts an invariant domain of quantification across worlds. First, it is not clear that this is consistent with other features of Skorupski's view. For example, he claims that truths about fictional objects and putative reals are 'truths about minds' (Skorupski 2010: 429) and are 'contingently actual' (Skorupski 2010: 425). These are intuitively plausible when we take the properties such entities have, and their presence in the domain of quantification, to somehow depend upon the minds that conjure up, imagine, *inter alia*, such objects. But if putative reals and fictional objects are in domains of quantification at worlds where no agents exist, then it becomes harder to see how Skorupski can maintain his just-quoted claims.

Irrealist cognitivism on a constant-domain view could perhaps capture how some of the properties of fictional objects depend upon their authors. Had Ferdowsi not written the *Shahnameh*, Rostam would not have had the property of *being strong*. The second problem, however, is that it would not be able to capture the thought that fictional objects are *created* by

their authors. By ‘created’, I do not mean ‘made to exist’. Rather, understand fictional creation as the creator being responsible for the presence of a fictional object in a domain of quantification; had Ferdowsi not written the Shahnameh, nothing would have been Rostam.

The intuition that what fictional objects there are *supervene upon* the story-telling activities of *creators* is a very plausible claim about fictional objects. By accepting a constant-domain understanding of non-existent objects, however, irrealist cognitivism will have to justify rejecting this thought. Perhaps talk of ‘creation’ is a metaphor best rejected or better explained another way.¹²⁹ But this is a heavy cost that is, *ceteris paribus*, best avoided.

Third, Skorupski will struggle to maintain a distinction between fictional objects and mind-independent reason relations if he accepts a constant-domain view. We’ve glossed what a ‘mind-independent’ non-existent object is as one the presence of which in the domain of quantification does not depend upon any agent. But now fictional objects (and putative reals) will meet this condition too. This generates a precise, and more worrying, version of the objection that irrealist cognitivism looks like fictionalism in disguise.

Skorupski would have to offer an alternative sharpening of ‘mind-independence’ to help here. What he does offer, however, in conjunction with a constant-domain containing fictional objects, makes things worse. First, he offers a counterfactual test. That ‘there would have been no Sherlock Holmes if Conan Doyle had not existed’ would suggest that Sherlock Holmes is mind-dependent (Skorupski 2010: 439). This, clearly, is no help here, since, *ex hypothesi*, Sherlock Holmes is in the domain of quantification regardless of Doyle’s existence.

¹²⁹ See Priest (2016: 118–121) for one way of doing this, though Priest does acknowledge that some see the force of this intuition to be enough to motivate a variant-domain view. See also Deutsch (1991).

The second difference is supposedly epistemic: whilst Doyle might have some sort of epistemic authority over the properties of Holmes, Skorupski denies anyone has any such authority over what is true of reason relations.¹³⁰ This, *prima facie*, may be due to Skorupski's thinking there is some distinction between imagining or 'fictioning' on the one hand and 'supposing' or engaging in 'pure cognition' on the other (Skorupski 2010: 429).

Of course, there is such a distinction. The problem: it becomes unclear how to understand it once we admit of a constant-domain view with fictional objects in that domain. For what we call imagining or 'fictioning' now looks more akin to *discovery* than, for example, authoritatively pronouncing upon one's 'creation'. Fictional objects become 'out there' to be discovered, as opposed to 'created'. Especially in the absence of a comprehension principle, it is difficult to see how this can be resolved.¹³¹ The fictionalism worry remains.

Suggesting irrealist cognitivism adopt a variable-domain view, on which the non-existents differ across worlds, is thus motivated, first, for consistency with Skorupski's stated view of fictional objects and putative reals as 'contingently actual but necessarily non-existent' (Skorupski 2010: 425). Second, to ensure fictional objects and putative reals are 'mind-dependent' by having their presence in the domain of quantification depend upon agents (either imagining them, or mistakenly thinking they exist, respectively). Third, to hopefully prevent collapse of the alleged distinction between fictional objects and reason relations.

We must then ask: are non-existent reason relations in *some but not all* domains or *all* domains? The former option seems explicitly rejected by Skorupski, as he takes ethical and other (pure) normative truths to be (metaphysically) necessary (Skorupski 2010: 188; 490–491).

¹³⁰ Skorupski's claims regarding authorial authority over fiction are controversial; see Kroon and Voltolini (2019).

¹³¹ See Priest (2016: 116–133) for relevant discussion.

Moreover, if the reason why reason relations obtain ends up having anything to do with the actions of agents, then, again, the mind-dependent and mind-independent irreal distinction looks collapsed.

We are left with the suggestion that whilst what fictional objects and putative reals there are in a domain at a world depends upon agents (imagining or hypothesising respectively), what reason relations there are remains the same across all worlds. This would secure the mind-independence (or objectivity) of reason relations, as we have precisified that claim. The question, however, is now *why* we should think the same reason relations obtain across all worlds.

A *prima facie* attractive option is to offer a partner-in-innocence here of *abstract* objects. Many Meinongians think abstract objects – like numbers – are non-existents that are present at every domain of quantification. The problem is that Skorupski (2010: 429–430) denies that abstract objects are their own class of irreal objects. Instead, he suggests abstracta are reducible to reason relations in two steps: first, talk of abstracta is reducible to talk of what is possible (such as mathematically possible structures for numbers) and, second, that possibility itself is normative such that to say that ‘it is possible that p ’ means ‘there is not sufficient reason [...] to exclude the supposition that p ’ (Skorupski 2010: 430). So, this option is unavailable to him.

A second option is to offer his proprietary normative account of necessity to explain why reason relations are present in all domains of quantification. But this is circular: we would be being told that reason relations are present in all domains because they are necessary, and then being told that what it is to be necessary is for there to be sufficient reason to exclude the supposition that reason relations are not present in all domains. The question we want answered is *why* that is so.

Mere insistence on the necessity of reason relations ultimately just pushes our question back: why is it necessary that reason relations are present in domains of quantification across worlds, or why are pure normative propositions necessarily true? Recall that if no answer is forthcoming here, then what reason relations obtain may differ across worlds. With that returns the worries of distinguishing between mind-dependent and mind-independent irreal objects we've already seen. No answer, I claim, is forthcoming.

Skorupski might appeal to our apparent possession of normative knowledge via spontaneity and his claim that any knowledge acquired through spontaneity has irreal entities as its objects. But, even granted *arguendo*, this offers no answer to why those objects of knowledge are *necessary*. Worse, it reinvigorates worries that the role *we* play in spontaneous knowledge acquisition somehow involves creating or placing irreal reason relations in the domain of quantification at our world.

Appeal to apparent epistemological differences between our knowledge of reason relations and, say, fictional objects, as evidence of a difference in the modal status of such objects, would be question-begging. Skorupski maintains that our knowledge of fictional objects involves 'imagination' whilst that of reason relations involves 'insight' (Skorupski 2010: 429). This alone, however, does not suggest that what we are having insight into are reason relations that are present in, and possess all the same properties at, every domain of quantification. Absent an argument for why their presence in such domains is not due to something about agents then, again, worries of fictionalism reemerge.

Finally, recall that, for Skorupski, we acquire normative knowledge (of reason relations) through warrant-conferring spontaneous normative dispositions (to believe, think, or feel) and convergence amongst enquirers. Skorupski acknowledges his 'ineliminably dialogical' view faces

a challenge: ‘could there not be cognitive communities of beings with systematically different normative responses?’ (Skorupski 2010: 502). For he grants that ‘we cannot infer, from the very concept of a reason, that the norms warranted for us are warranted from every community [...] Could other norms be warranted for other communities?’ (Skorupski 2010: 502).

Skorupski in fact allows that this is a (presumably metaphysical) possibility, granting that there is a ‘cognitive-community parameter’ in reason relations which ‘becomes variable if cognitive communities with radically different natures are introduced’, taking ‘common *natures*’ to be a relata of reason relations (Skorupski 2010: 502–503). ‘Various cognitive natures’, he continues, ‘have their various cognitive norms, pure universalizable truths about reasons’ (Skorupski 2010: 503).

But now irrealist cognitivism is in trouble. For, in Skorupski’s own words, norms (pure normative propositions) become ‘grounded in cognitive communities of beings with the same natural dispositions’ (Skorupski 2010: 503). Unless ‘our’ cognitive community is necessarily what any cognitive community *must* be like, then the objects of our normative knowledge are not guaranteed to be necessary, that is, present in all domains of quantification. Relatedly, they are no longer guaranteed to in any relevant sense be *objectively* true either. Since, as Skorupski grants, it is metaphysically possible that (not necessarily human) cognitive communities could be radically unlike our own, having different normative dispositions and converging on different claims, truths about reason relations amongst ‘our community’ at our world are not necessarily so. This reinvents the worry that reason relations now look mind-dependent in the same sense that fictional objects and putative reals are (having their presence in the domain of quantification depend upon our normative dispositions and/or having the truths about them be truths ‘about minds’ and agents). Reason relations look worryingly analogous to fictional objects again too.

What irrealist cognitivism requires is a reason to think that irreal reason relations are present, have the features that they do, and have the same objective true claims regarding them, across all worlds. Irrealist cognitivism in Skorupski's form cannot provide this. Whether a Meinongian meta-ethical theory can do so, or can otherwise sharpen the alleged distinction between mind-dependent and mind-independent irreals to prevent the collapse of reason relations into fictional or other mind-dependent entities, remains to be seen.

§5. Conclusion

In §2, I introduced irrealist cognitivism and Meinongianism, and argued that rejection of the former for its acceptance of the latter would be a mistake. I turned, in §3.1, to argue that Copp's objections to irrealist cognitivism betrayed instructive misunderstandings of it and Meinongianism. In §3.2, I argued, *pace* Copp and Olson, that Meinongian meta-ethical theories can offer novel and *prima facie* plausible responses to metaphysical and ontological objections to traditional non-naturalism. §3.3 summarised five good reasons for meta-ethicists and metaphysicians to be concerned with the prospects of irrealist cognitivism and any other Meinongian meta-ethics. I argued in §4 that irrealist cognitivism faces three strong objections attention to the wider Meinongianism literature highlights: difficulties surrounding its account of existence, the lack of a comprehension principle and difficulty adopting those on the market, and a dilemma concerning whether irrealist cognitivism accepts a constant- or variant-domain view of non-existents. Together, they cast strong doubt on the viability of irrealist cognitivism so far developed.

But the fate of Meinongian meta-ethical theories is not yet decided. If workable, they offer an attractive form of non-reductionist meta-ethical theory that can plausibly respond to many objections plaguing non-naturalism. Moreover, each objection I've raised has identified avenues for their further development. For example, what comprehension principle should a

Meinongian meta-ethical theory adopt? How would the resources such principles offer, and the distinctions they employ, map onto the normative? Can these repel the more sophisticated forms of the charges of collapse into standard non-naturalism or fictionalism? These are exciting questions for another time.

Two final notes. First, that Meinongianism is *prima facie* plausible and can be employed in meta-ethics raises questions over most meta-ethical debate. Is its neglect of Meinongianism due to implicit acceptance of what Skorupski calls global realism? The often implicitly accepted Kant-Frege-Russell-Quine view of existence? Or something else? Whatever it is, it stands in need of defence, especially since such assumptions are not, as I've argued, obviously true, and their acceptance collapses the region of logical space that Meinongian meta-ethical theories occupy.

Second, all I've said should attract Meinongian attention. For why have Meinongians generally ignored morality and normativity? This is unclear as normative properties and relations are not even included as examples of existents *or* non-existents in Meinongian texts. If a view like Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism can work, this will strengthen an abductive case for Meinongianism *simpliciter*, offering the best explanation of phenomena such as *de re* intentional states, the paradox of non-being, *inter alia*. I have argued that we should pay closer attention to whether a phenomenon that should be added to that list is *normativity*.

Chapter 4

Relaxed Realism, Ontological Pluralism, and Methodology in Metaphysics

§1. Introduction

Are there different ways of existing? Not different senses of ‘exist’ – different *ways in which* things exist. We typically grant that there are different types or kinds of objects, for example the abstract and the concrete. But do they exist in different ways? Despite a strong historical pedigree, this view vanished in Quine’s wake.

Times have changed. But recent defenders of ways of existing are yet to engage with normative metaphysics.¹³² Meta-ethics too has largely ignored the debate over whether there are different ways of existing. I think this lack of engagement is a mistake. The first aim of this chapter is to explain why by engaging with a theory that has made explicit appeal to different ways of existing, albeit, and I’ll argue problematically, without attention to the relevant meta-metaphysical literature.

This is Scanlon’s normative realism developed in *Being Realistic about Reasons* (Scanlon 2014). Unlike Parfit’s and Skorupski’s, Scanlon’s realism is often presented as the clearest articulation of ‘meta-ethical quietism’ and is directly engaged with most for that reason. Most engagement with Scanlon’s view, however, takes its details to be unclear, implausible, or to have objectionable consequences.¹³³

¹³² Chief defender Kris McDaniel (2017: 170–194) only considers whether persons have a distinct mode of existence. As he also accepts degrees or gradations of existence, he also asks whether the value of objects vary with their degree of existence.

¹³³ See, for example, Maguire (2014); Dreier (2015); Ingram (2017); Wodak (2017); McPherson (2011; 2013); Enoch (2011: Ch. 5); and Enoch & McPherson (2017). Two exceptions are Böddeling (2020) and Ridge (2019), who argue that Scanlon’s view collapses into quasi-realism. For the reasons provided in the introduction, I bracket this issue. As will become clear, though, the theoretical resources of the best version of Scanlon’s view go beyond the deflationism that often characterises quasi-realism.

The second aim of this chapter is to raise two novel challenges to Scanlon's meta-ethical theory by focusing on the best development of its underlying meta-metaphysics. The third is to highlight how, despite these problems, the live option of a view like Scanlon's raises interesting challenges to all who reject it. I proceed as follows.

In §2, I introduce Scanlon's view and argue that important features of it remain unclear. To clarify them, and to see whether objections raised to it succeed, Scanlon's meta-metaphysics requires clarification. I argue, in §3, that appreciating the role that the view that there are different ways of existing plays in the theory offers a formulation of Scanlon's view that can respond to various objections. In §4, I argue that the *prima facie* promising version of Scanlon's view offered faces two objections which highlight avenues for further research. I conclude in §5.

As with Parfit's non-realist cognitivism in Chapter 1, my aim here is not Scanlon exegesis but, rather, to develop the most plausible version of Scanlon's view. Whilst I explain why I do think that Scanlon's own view is best understood as the version of it I offer in §3, it is not my aim to conclusively demonstrate that here. Let's proceed.

§2. Scanlon's Relaxed Realism and Meta-Metaphysics

Tim Scanlon defends a form of normative realism I shall call relaxed realism.¹³⁴ On his view, there are objectively true normative claims that are 'fundamental' in that they are 'not reducible to or identifiable with non-normative truths, such as truths about the natural world of physical objects, causes, and effects, nor can they be explained in terms of notions of rationality or rational agency that are not themselves claims about reasons' (Scanlon 2014: 2).¹³⁵ These claims,

¹³⁴ I borrow this terminology from Sarah McGrath (2014).

¹³⁵ That is the sense in which Scanlon's view is non-naturalist. He calls his view 'Reasons Fundamentalism'. Scanlon also takes reasons as 'fundamental' as 'other normative notions such as *good* and *ought* [are] analyzable in terms of

Scanlon maintains, are correctly understood as concerning normative reasons and reason-relations, which obtain between a fact, agent, set of conditions, and an action or attitude (Scanlon 2014: 31).

Scanlon's defence of relaxed realism is based upon a 'general view of ontological questions.' This meta-ontological view, Scanlon claims, reveals that 'the idea of irreducibly normative truths presents no metaphysical problem' (Scanlon 2014: 15). To understand his view, it is helpful to see what Scanlon wishes to reject.

Consider: in ontological debates over what exists, and metaphysical debates over the nature of what exists, are the considerations that settle the answers to such questions the same regardless of what subject matter we are discussing?

It is often assumed that there is one set of considerations that settle all metaphysical and ontological debates. These are, crudely put, empirical adequacy (e.g., consistency with best relevant scientific theories), intuitive support, and a series of theoretical virtues such as ideological and ontological parsimony, explanatory power, and internal coherence. The precise interpretation of and relationship between such considerations is controversial. But that there is some single set of criteria for theory choice that settles – in at least the epistemic sense of provides evidence in favour or against accepting some theory – is often not seen as so.¹³⁶

This crude picture suggests a way of understanding all ontological and metaphysical debates that takes little notice of the fact that we ask about the existence and nature of objects

reasons' (Scanlon 2014: 2). By 'objective', Scanlon means that normative judgements are 'judgment-independent' (it is possible for us at least individually to be mistaken about such claims (Scanlon 2014: 93)) and 'choice-independent' ('the standards for assessing such judgements do not depend upon what we, collectively, have done, chosen, or adopted, and would not be different had we done, chosen, or adopted something else' (Scanlon 2014: 94)).

¹³⁶ See Kriegel (2013) for discussion.

across a wide range of *different subject matters*. These considerations can generate argumentative strategies, like arguing that the existence of something is indispensable to our best scientific theories, allegedly applicable across all subject matters. Of course, a theory about the existence and nature of numbers and one concerning chairs will need to explain very different things and confront different intuitive data. But that we should adopt such a theory only if it somehow comes out on top in the battle of the criteria above is, for most, uncontroversial.

Many subject matters presume that what they concern exists. Take Medieval European discourse about witches. Such discourse not only involved claims regarding what witches are and when someone is a witch, but also claims about how to ascertain whether someone is a witch. Assuming existential quantification is ontologically committing, this discourse entails true various existentially quantified claims that quantify over witches, committing us to witches. If we took the truth of existential claims to be settled solely by what some discourse entails true, then we look stuck with witches.

But notice an epistemic possibility that our above crude picture allows. To assess whether witches exist, we must formulate some theory according to which they do exist and that specifies their nature. We must then consider alternative theories on which they do not exist. Whether we should accept that they exist is determined by whether our candidate theory emerges victorious in the battle of the criteria above. If it does not, then despite what witch-discourse suggests, we have best epistemic grounds to deny that witches exist.

The above view, then, allows that whilst we might have some internally coherent way of talking which licenses some existential claims, based on some agreed-upon ways of determining whether they are true in some discourse, we may still be mistaken in thinking that the relevant entities exist. For the theories which posit the existence of witches may be either less empirically

adequate, less intuitively plausible, or less theoretically virtuous (less parsimonious, explanatorily powerful, *inter alia*), or some combination thereof, than theories which deny their existence.

This picture is in the background of much normative metaphysics. It suggests that to ascertain whether *normative* entities exist – such as reason relations and moral properties – we should formulate our competing theories and assail them with the above criteria for theory choice. That theory which emerges as best supported by the criteria of empirical adequacy, intuitive support, and theoretical virtues (such as relative simplicity and explanatory power) should be adopted. The debate between, say, traditional normative non-naturalists and their opponents is thus understood as over which theory is most explanatorily powerful, best fits the intuitive data regarding normativity, and other disagreements ultimately concerning such criteria for theory choice.¹³⁷

These criteria are (often implicitly) employed to generate metaphysical objections to non-naturalism. For example, if normative properties and relations are radically unlike anything else belief in which is licensed by these criteria, queerness worries may emerge. Parsimony objections also arise if some other theory can explain everything non-naturalism can whilst positing fewer types of entities.

Or consider Gilbert Harman's (1977) influential *explanatory requirement*. Harman suggests that we have reason to be committed to the existence of something only if it plays some role in explaining what happens in the natural world (or our experience of it). But we might doubt that irreducibly normative properties and relations would play any such role. If so, then we lack reason to accept their existence. Such a requirement would enjoy justification from one way of

¹³⁷ David Enoch puts his methodological commitments as concerning doing philosophy *simpliciter*, but he is a non-naturalist likely committed to something like this general picture (see Enoch 2011: 14–15). This helps explain why he thinks that non-naturalism may lose some 'plausibility points' on account of its metaphysical commitments.

understanding the theoretical virtue of explanatory power as a general criterion for theory choice in metaphysics.

Scanlon rejects this general picture and argues, in doing so, that his relaxed realism evades standard metaphysical and ontological objections. Instead, he suggests that,

[...] the way of thinking about these matters that makes most sense is a view that does not privilege science but takes as basic a range of domains, including mathematics, science, and moral and practical reasoning. It holds that statements within all of these domains are capable of truth and falsity, and that the truth values of statements about one domain, insofar as they do not conflict with statements of some other domain, are properly settled by the standards of the domain they are about. Mathematical questions, including questions about the existence of numbers and sets are settled by mathematical reasoning, scientific questions, including questions about the existence of bosons, by scientific reasoning, normative questions by normative reasoning, and so on. [...]

(Scanlon 2014: 19)

Thus ‘questions of ontology, and metaphysics more generally, are always domain-specific’ (Scanlon 2017: 884). Four clarifications. First, by ‘domain’ Scanlon means ‘subject matter’, that is, the subject that certain claims are about (Scanlon 2017: 880). Empirical claims are about the existence and properties of physical objects and their causal relations; arithmetic about numbers and their relations; normative claims are about the reasons we have in favour or against actions or attitudes.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Scanlon does not mean anything like Carnapian linguistic frameworks by ‘domain’ (See Scanlon 2014: 19, fn. 3; 2017: 879–881).

Second, by ‘standards’ Scanlon is invoking the standards of reasoning that are employed when we investigate different subject matters. Examples he gives are scientific generalisations, mathematical axioms, and moral principles (Scanlon 2014: 20). Suppose we ask whether there is an even prime number. Since Scanlon accepts that quantification, in natural language and with the existential quantifier of formal logic, is ontologically committing, that question becomes the question of whether there exists an even prime number (Scanlon 2014: 17).

The correctness of the relevant mathematical calculation to determine whether there is an even prime number is often taken to leave room for disagreement over whether numbers exist. If so, then to see if such a number exists, we might formulate some mathematical Platonist and nominalist theories and see which is best supported by the above general criteria for theory choice. On Scanlon’s view, this is a mistake. This ontological question, as Scanlon suggests of all ontological questions, is *domain-specific*. As such, we should employ the standards internal to discourse about the subject matter it concerns. So, we should see if there is a number which has only two factors: 1 and itself (where itself is 2). Since there is (the number 2), there exists such an even prime number (and so at least one number exists).¹³⁹

Scanlon suggests that we can defang metaphysical and ontological objections to irreducibly normative facts, properties, and relations by understanding them as domain-specific questions. Consider Harman’s explanatory requirement. Scanlon argues that his view explains the ‘appeal and the limits’ of Harman’s requirement, suggesting first that in the ‘domain of natural science, the relevant role of entities is in the explanation of natural phenomena’ (Scanlon 2014: 26). If so, then we have reason to accept the existence of some physical entity only if it plays some role in explaining some given natural phenomena.

¹³⁹ See Scanlon (2017: 878–879) for discussion of the mathematical case.

But the role of entities *in the normative domain* is to explain *normative* phenomena. So, we should not think that it is a requirement on reasons to believe in, say, wrongness or reason relations that they explain something about the natural world. Instead, insofar as something like Harman's requirement holds in domains other than the natural domain, it is that we should admit of new entities (or employ new concepts) only if they help describe or explain the phenomena that the subject matter in question concerns. And that is precisely what Scanlon thinks the positing of irreducibly normative facts, properties, and relations does: it helps us offer not, say, the best causal explanations of the natural world but, rather, the best account of the subject matter of normativity.

Third, by claiming that the standards appropriate to some subject matter settle the truth-value of claims in that domain, Scanlon means only the 'pure' and not the 'mixed' claims of that domain. Mixed claims are ones that also make some claim about a different subject matter. Many normative claims are mixed: claiming some action is wrong may also involve some claims about the physical consequences of performing an act. But at least some normative claims are purely claims about what reason relations there are, what they count in favour of, *inter alia*, and it is such claims that Scanlon takes to be settled by first-order normative reasoning.¹⁴⁰

Fourth, Scanlon grants that pure claims can conflict with pure claims in other domains. Domains are thus not 'entirely autonomous', which helps Scanlon respond to worries like the following. Return to Medieval witch discourse. So long as some domain is 'well-defined, internally coherent, and *did not have any presuppositions or implications that might conflict with those of other domains*', Scanlon claims that we commit ourselves to the existence of what the claims of that

¹⁴⁰ Scanlon seems to take pure normative claims as universally quantified conditionals of the form: for all x , if x is in circumstances c , then there is a reason for x to (or not to) a . For example, for all x , if doing a is painful for x in circumstances c , then there is a reason for x to avoid doing a (see Scanlon 2014: 31–32, 36–37).

domain concern (Scanlon 2014: 27). This means we look committed to witches. Unless witch-discourse conflicts with another domain, and it seems to: since witches are supposed to have causal powers, such discourse seems to conflict with the natural domain and this, Scanlon claims, ‘provides decisive reason to reject the idea that there are witches’ (Scanlon 2014: 21).

As Tristram McPherson and David Enoch note, Scanlon does not offer a positive argument for his meta-metaphysics – and so, in turn, his view of normative ontology that seems to fall out of it (Enoch & McPherson 2017: 836–837). But we should note that it is rare for meta-metaphysical commitments to be explicitly articulated in first-order metaphysical debates, and on that Scanlon has done much more than his opponents. Moreover, it is rarer still for positive arguments to be offered for a general meta-metaphysical view. Instead, as Scanlon explicitly does, we more often find a general meta-metaphysical view being argued to be *prima facie* plausible, internally coherent, and one that allows its proponent to make various claims (Scanlon 2017: 895–896). This is the way in which I think Scanlon is best read.

So, my focus is on the positive details of the meta-metaphysics of relaxed realism. Unfortunately, these are unclear.

First, Scanlon (2014: 23) leaves it ‘entirely open’ what domains there are and what their individuation conditions are. This is unhelpful since domains at least appear to be playing a central explanatory role. It is the internal ‘standards’ of *domains* that apparently answer ontological and metaphysical questions and defang objections to his normative metaphysics. But without some principled account of subject matters and how they are individuated, Scanlon looks unable to offer a general answer to why there is not, for example, only one domain – everything – or a domain for every fine-grained subject matter conceivable, such as domains for tables, chairs,

numbers, the property redness, and more. The latter option, of course, would problematically multiply the conflicts between domains.

Second, what are these ‘standards’ that Scanlon is appealing to and how do they ‘settle’ ontological and metaphysical questions? Is *settling* a metaphysical or an epistemological relation? That is, are the standards of a domain those considerations that make it the case or entail that some claim(s) within a domain are *true*, or are they considerations that tell us when we have *justified belief* in claims within a domain?¹⁴¹

In *Being Realistic about Reasons*, Scanlon is unclear. For example, he says that normative truths ‘do not require strange metaphysical truth-makers. Such truths are determined by the standards of the normative domain itself’, seemingly suggesting the former (Scanlon 2014: 62). But he also says that ‘what is required to justify any existential claim, and what follows from such a claim, varies, depending on the kind of thing that is claimed to exist’ (Scanlon 2014: 25). That seems to suggest the latter.

Scanlon has since tried to clarify the matter:

The substantive [or metaphysical] reading is fundamental. Facts about the relations between numbers settle the matter (i.e. make it the case that 19 is prime). Calculating (that is to say, *carrying out* the calculation) is a proper way to settling the matter in the epistemological sense insofar as this calculation is a way of coming to know these facts. (Scanlon 2017: 884)

¹⁴¹ See Russell (2014), Wodak (2017: 2805–2806), and Enoch & McPherson (2017: 824).

Scanlon is suggesting, first, that there is some important relation between the ‘substantive’ or metaphysical considerations that make an answer to a question true or correct, and the epistemological considerations that we can rely upon as evidence for the correctness of some answer. Second, he tells us that the metaphysical reading of ‘settles’ is ‘fundamental’. What that means is unclarified. *Prima facie*, he seems to mean that the epistemological standards of a domain are in some sense dependent upon what the substantive standards are: the best way to come to know some facts depends, at least in part, on what those facts are supposed to be.

The general meta-metaphysical picture we began with understands empirical adequacy, intuitive support, and meeting various theoretical virtues as settling ontological and metaphysical debates in the *epistemological* sense. That a theory is empirically adequate, intuitively plausible, and has various theoretical virtues is what provides us with reason to believe it. Whether that theory is true, though, will of course depend upon the details of the subject matter in question: whether, for example, numbers exist or have the properties they are ascribed.

This suggests, at least *prima facie*, that the disagreement between Scanlon and his opponents, *pace* Scanlon, is epistemological. They disagree over what considerations generate justified belief in ontological and metaphysical claims: either the internal first-order standards of the subject matter they concern or some general, domain-independent criteria for theory choice. But Scanlon also seems to think that the *basis* for this difference in the epistemology of metaphysics has something to do with differing views about the subject matters in question which I shall return to shortly.

Third, what principled account can Scanlon’s view offer of how individually consistent ‘pure’ claims within different domains can conflict, and why certain domains can ‘trump’ others in cases of conflict? As Scanlon accepts, despite being supported by the standards of the witch

domain, we should reject the existence of witches because they conflict with what we know about the natural domain. But first, why precisely do these claims conflict? Does Scanlon's remark regarding the proposed causal powers of witches tell us anything about how conflicts, in general, can arise? Second, why should the natural domain trump those claims supported by the standards of the witch domain? Even if we agree, to have a working theory we need to understand why Scanlon's view entails this.

§3. Ways of Existing, Domains, Standards, and Conflicts

So, we need to clarify what domains there are and their individuation conditions, what standards are, how standards could settle (in either sense) metaphysical and ontological questions, what the relationship between substantive and epistemological standards is supposed to be, and explain how conflicts arise between domains and why some domains win in these conflicts.

Most attempts to do this have tried to interpret Scanlon's relaxed realism and its meta-metaphysics as a version of some other well-known meta-metaphysical view, such as forms of pragmatism or Amie Thomasson's (2014) 'easy ontology'.¹⁴² I think this is a mistake. Scanlon's view is more novel than commonly recognised and Scanlon himself offers the resources to clarify this.

To demonstrate this, I now highlight a final issue that needs to be clarified – as well as being the key to seeing how Scanlon might meet the above worries – in Scanlon's discussion of a 'domain of domains' or higher-order domain.

¹⁴² See Enoch & McPherson (2017) for the best attempt to do this.

Prima facie, Scanlon is committed to such a domain having its own standards. These might help explain and settle cases of conflict. But it would also, it seems, entail that there are domain-independent standards that are relevant to determining the truth-value of claims within any given domain. But that is precisely what Scanlon wants to deny. Moreover, Scanlon wishes to deny that our ontological commitments ‘represent a claim on our part about what *the world* contains, in any meaningful sense of “the world”’ (Scanlon 2014: 24). But the subject matter of what subject matters there are seems to be a meaningful sense of ‘the world’ Scanlon denies: the world is simply the totality of subject matters and what they concern.

Scanlon (2017: 885) grants that there is a domain of domains: the subject matter of what subject matters there are and the relations between them. But he *denies* that it has a set of standards of its own that settle (in any sense) the truth-value of claims within other domains. This seems obviously ad hoc. Scanlon tellingly responds,

This move would be mere evasion if there were some general, domain-independent conditions of ‘existence’ such that the various existential claims made in every domain entail or presuppose that entities of the kinds they refer to fulfill these conditions. If this were so, then there would be a genuine external question whether the things to which we are committed actually exist. But there are no such conditions. We make claims expressed by the existential quantifier in many domains, but what is required to justify any existential claim, and what follows from such a claim, varies, depending on the kind of thing that is claimed to exist. The claim that mountains exist is licensed by and licenses certain other claims about the physical world. The claim that there exists a number or set of a certain kind is licensed by and licenses certain other mathematical claims. And in each case that is all there is to it. Nothing more is claimed or required. (Scanlon 2014: 25, emphasis mine)

A footnote to the above clarifies that,

What I am claiming is (1) that the only thing common to existential claims across all domains is the purely formal logic of the existential quantifier and (2) that *the conditions required in order for objects in different domains to exist varies from domain to domain.* (Scanlon 2014: 25, fn. 12, emphasis mine).

Finally, he most recently clarifies that,

This does not mean that the English word, ‘exist’ is ambiguous [...] It only means that we can use that word, with its single meaning, to make different kinds of claims. The univocal meaning of ‘exist’ is given by the logic of the existential quantifier. *But the content of a claim that something exists varies, depending on the kind of thing that is in question. These are different ways of existing, not different senses of existence.* The universe of all those things whose existence we are committed to is just the extension of the disjunction I mentioned earlier: the things that are either a physical object, or a number, or a set, or ... *To belong to the extension of this disjunction is not to have a further property of existence over and above what is attributed to a thing by a true existential statement within one or another of these domains.* So nothing could be truly said to exist by a statement within one of these domains yet fail to exist in this more general ‘sense.’ (Scanlon 2017: 883, emphasis mine)

I quote these passages at length because they emphasise a feature of Scanlon’s view that has remained consistent, is often ignored, and offers the best hope of making Scanlon’s view work. Whilst Scanlon is clear these remarks illustrate something crucial about his view, it has not been clear what this is. At least, I hope, until now.

Notice the emphasis. Scanlon appears to be claiming that the domain of domains lacks its own standards that settle (in either sense) the truth-value of claims within specific domains *because* it is false that there is one ‘general, domain-independent’ *way in which things exist* such that all existential claims presuppose that the same conditions are met for something to exist. Instead, there are *different ways in which things exist*.

The final desideratum for clarifying Scanlon’s view is to clarify the relationship Scanlon seems to be positing between ways of existing and standards of domains. I now offer a reading which, I argue, allows us to meet the desiderata outlined above *and* respond to some other objections to relaxed realism.

Whilst granting existential quantification as ontologically committing and capturing whatever all existential claims share, Scanlon is claiming that both *what it amounts to for something to exist* and *what justifies existential claims* differs across domains. That is, the standards that metaphysically settle what exists (what considerations make it the case that something exists) and those that epistemologically settle what exists (what considerations justify or provide evidence for something’s existence) differ depending upon the subject matter in question.¹⁴³

This becomes even clearer when he explains why he thinks we ‘have no reasons to be concerned with our general ontological commitments [...] the totality of things the existence of which is entailed by all the statements (in any domain) that we accept as true’ (Scanlon 2014: 23). For,

¹⁴³ Wedgwood (2016) also reads Scanlon as denying that a single method for answering all ontological questions, though he does not identify Scanlon’s commitment to ways of existing.

[...] this merely disjunctive ‘universe’ in which something exists if it is a physical object, or a number or is entailed by true statements of some other domain, is entirely parasitic on the particular domains that contribute to it. *That is, it provides no bases for standards of existence beyond those of these particular domains*: no domain-independent reason to want to minimize these commitments, for example, and no reason in general to limit these commitments to concrete entities as opposed to abstract ones. (Scanlon 2014: 23–24, my emphasis)

Scanlon is suggesting that what it amounts to for something to exist provides the ‘bases for standards of existence’. We can charitably read this as suggesting that the conditions entities must meet to exist provide us with whatever ‘standard’ makes it the case, when met, that something exists, and highlight conditions under which we are justified in believing that something exists.

Thus, Scanlon claims, the higher-order domain would have consequences for what exists only if there is only one way for something to exist. But there are apparently different ways of existing for the subjects of different subject matters. What it amounts to for *anything* to exist is, on Scanlon’s view, a ‘merely disjunctive’ condition of the more specific conditions that must be met for entities to exist. So, the subject matter of what subject matters there are poses no challenge to thinking that what settles (in both senses) ontological and metaphysical questions in different domains are the internal standards of those domains.

Scanlon is explicitly rejecting one of the most pervasive assumptions in contemporary meta-ontology and meta-metaphysics more generally,

(Ontological Monism) There is exactly one way of existing.

And instead accepting,

(Ontological Pluralism) There are at least two ways of existing.¹⁴⁴

The debate between these views is *not* over what entities exist, nor what type or kind of entities exist. For example, both can in principle agree that chairs and numbers exist and that the former are concrete and the latter abstract. Instead, they disagree over whether whatever exists, of whatever type or kind, exists in the same way or not. For example, they may disagree over whether abstracta and concreta exist in the same way.¹⁴⁵

Orthodoxy today, the first view became so after Quine (1969b: 242) and is prominently defended by Peter van Inwagen (1998; 2001; 2009). Assuming that existence claims are correctly understood in terms of existential quantification, and taking Quine's slogan that to be is to be the value of a bound variable, the orthodox have come to think ontological pluralism 'untenable, perhaps unthinkable, and almost certainly devastatingly refuted' (Turner 2010: 6).

It may come as a surprise then that, first, it is a historically popular view. Kris McDaniel (2017: 1–4) lists as some of its likely defenders Aristotle, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Leibniz, and Kant. In the twentieth century, influential friends of the view included Meinong (1983: 49–62), G.E. Moore (1993: 161–163), Bertrand Russell (1997: 91–100), L. Susan Stebbing (1917), Edith Stein (2002; 2009), Edmund Husserl (2005a: 249–250, 2005b: 17), and Martin Heidegger (1962).

¹⁴⁴ Some also characterise these views in terms of whether there are different 'kinds' or 'modes' of existence (or, synonymously, being). 'Ontological pluralism' is sometimes used to refer to Carnap's meta-ontology; see Eklund (2009).

¹⁴⁵ Veluwenkamp (2017) suggests that Scanlon accepts ontological pluralism. But he conflates Parfit's and Scanlon's views, takes Scanlon's pluralism to depend upon truth pluralism (which I demonstrate shortly that it does not), and saddles Scanlon with a form of ontological pluralism that I argue in §4.1 Scanlon cannot accept.

Second, the view has received recent strong defence, most notably from McDaniel (2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2017) and Jason Turner (2010; 2012).¹⁴⁶ Importantly, as we'll see, these defences demonstrate that one can grant the Quinean orthodoxy of existential quantification as ontologically committing, and employment of existential quantifiers to formulate existence claims, and still adopt *prima facie* plausible forms of ontological pluralism.

My suggestion, then, is that Scanlon's quoted claims above are best understood as acceptance of some form of ontological pluralism. Whilst Scanlon makes no reference to the relevant literature, he seems to explicitly commit himself to the view. If so, then, as I've explained, and assuming he can plausibly adopt that view, this defangs the objection from the higher-order domain by offering a non-ad hoc explanation of why it lacks standards that settle (in any sense) what exists.

And it does more. First, recall worries that Scanlon offers no principled account of what domains there are and what their individuation conditions are. Without one, he appears to be arbitrarily delineating what subject matters there are to make his view work. How could Scanlon block the worry that there is a subject matter of everything, or many ultra-fine-grained subject matters?

We've now seen how Scanlon responds to the subject matter of 'everything' – a universal domain – by agreeing there is one and denying it troubles his view. He says, in response to Enoch and McPherson (2017: 824) who press the latter worry by asking whether there are apple or orange domains, with: '[...] why not? These domains will mostly be uninteresting since they

¹⁴⁶ See also Cotnoir & Edwards (2015).

are so obviously sub-domains of the domain of the natural world' (Scanlon 2017: 882). This response is unsatisfying precisely because it leaves unanswered *why* they are sub-domains of the domain of the natural world.

A plausible rationale is available, however, assuming ontological pluralism. For suppose something exists in the natural domain if and only if it has causal standing.¹⁴⁷ We might then say that the natural domain just is that subject matter concerning what (if it exists) has causal standing. This makes the apple and orange domains sub-domains of the natural domain, since they both concern entities that, if they exist, are amongst those entities with causal standing. And since the (metaphysical and epistemological) standards of a domain are determined by the way of existing that domain concerns, neither sub-domain comes with its own proprietary set of standards that somehow conflict with the natural domain.

More generally, Scanlon can maintain that some subject matter is the subject matter of S, as opposed to N, because S concerns a way of existing distinct from that which N concerns. With this, we have an individuation condition that explains how Scanlon can respond to the domain of domains and more fine-grained (sub-)domains. It does not tell us exactly *what* subject matters there are. But it does provide a plausible rationale for delineating the domains Scanlon does: suggesting that entities in the natural, mathematical, and normative domains have different ways of existing. If this is plausible, then the appearance of ad hoc-ness is alleviated.

Second, assuming ontological pluralism, Scanlon can also offer a general account of what standards are, and what the relationship between the metaphysical or 'substantive' and epistemological standards is supposed to be.

¹⁴⁷ One can replace this condition with another arguably met solely by physical, concrete objects, such as spatio-temporal location, and offer the same forthcoming explanation.

The standards of a given domain are what makes it the case that what that domain concerns exists, and when we are justified in believing some existential claims. Suppose what it amounts to for something to exist in the natural domain is for it to have causal standing. The ‘substantive’ standard in the natural domain then is that what makes it the case that, say, tables or chairs exist is that they have causal standing. The epistemological standards, Scanlon can maintain, are parasitic upon the substantive standard: the condition(s) which tell us when we have evidence for belief in tables and chairs are whatever conditions best enable us to enquire into whether some putative entity has causal standing or not. Crudely put, this will be those conditions that constitute the scientific method.

More generally, the conditions that tell us what makes it the case (what ‘substantively’ settles) that something exists are those that capture the way of existing enjoyed by entities in a given domain. The conditions that determine when we have evidence for the existence of what a subject matter concerns are the conditions that codify our best means of determining whether the relevant condition for existing that the subject matter concerns is met and by what.

Third, what of metaphysical questions about the *nature* of what exists? When investigating whether, for example, there are entities that have causal standing, we will employ what we take to be the most effective means of ascertaining this. But such means will *also* enable us to answer questions about the *nature* of what we are investigating – what types of properties, features, and relations they have. This is, thus, how to best place Scanlon’s remarks about the first-order reasoning of different domains: by being those appropriate to (epistemologically) determining whether the apparent subjects of a given domain exist, they also enable us to develop justified beliefs into the nature of those entities.

Fourth, this helps respond to worries some have raised regarding what Scanlon says about the revisability of the standards of domains. As Daniel Wodak (2017: 2813) points out, if we thought that the *metaphysical* standards that make some claims true could be revised, then, for example, in the natural domain Humorism in medicine was once literally true and later false. Wodak objects that to instead think the ‘truth-value-determining ontological standards’ are ‘immutable’ and the ‘justification-determining epistemic standards’ are ‘revisable’ fits ‘neither the letter nor the spirit of Scanlon’s view’ (Wodak 2017: 2813). I’ve argued this is false and take the quoted passages above to aid in demonstrating that. Relaxed realism is best read as taking what makes it the case that entities in certain domains exist and have the features they have to be fixed, and that the epistemological standards of domains can (and have) change(d) as we develop better ways to investigate, for example, what has causal powers or whatever meets the conditions of existence in the mathematical or normative domains.

Fifth, we can now offer a principled account of how claims within different domains can conflict and why we should privilege certain domains when they do so. Suppose domain D1 concerns a way of existing E1 and D2 a way of existing E2. They conflict when either D1 makes some claim regarding E2, or D2 regarding E1. For example, some domain other than the natural might make some claim about entities with causal standing – either that certain entities not licensed to exist by our best epistemic practices in the natural domain do in fact exist, or have some properties we are not justified, by those standards, in thinking they possess.

Scanlon maintains that here the natural domain ‘trumps’ the other. We can now say why: if the other domain is not covertly a sub-domain of the natural, then it must concern some other way of existing than, for example, possession of causal standing. If so, and yet it makes some claim about entities that have causal standing, then we should appeal to our best epistemological standards for ascertaining the existence and nature of entities with causal standing to settle that

dispute. The scientific method is our best such method – not only because of its predictive and other success, but also because it is designed to enable us to, *inter alia*, detect causal standing better than any other means we know. If that method suggests we are justified in dismissing these claims made in the other domain, as we are assuming they do, then we are justified in taking the natural domain to ‘trump’ the other whose standards are conflicting with it.¹⁴⁸

Sixth, my reading offers an explanation as to how relaxed realism could consistently maintain that the ‘pure’ claims of the natural, normative, and mathematical domains do not conflict. They each concern some way of existing. As such, for a claim to be a ‘pure’ claim about the relevant subject matter, it must only concern things that exist in the particular way that things in that domain exist.

Finally, assuming ontological pluralism, relaxed realism can also offer a better response to the most influential objection to Scanlon’s view: Tristram McPherson’s and David Enoch’s symmetry objection.¹⁴⁹ Consider two linguistic communities: the reasoners and the counter-reasoners. The latter think that various facts that the reasoners think count *in favour of* actions are counter-reasons *against* such actions, and vice-versa. Intuitively, however, it seems like the counter-reasoners are making some mistake – the domain of counter-reasons seems confused in some way that the normative domain is not.

Scanlon offers a *normative* response. He suggests that since reasoners and counter-reasoners both take reasons and counter-reasons to count in favour or against acts or attitudes, they are ‘both making claims about the same subject matter – the normative domain’ (Scanlon

¹⁴⁸ This responds to Wodak’s (2017: 2806) objection that Scanlon offers no ‘asymmetric condition to serve as a tie-breaker’ in conflicts.

¹⁴⁹ Enoch (2011: 124–127) and McPherson (2011: 232–238) both offer versions of this objection and reiterate it in Enoch & McPherson (2017). See Kremm & Schafer (2017: 653–655) for discussion.

2017: 887). And the mistake that the counter-reasoners are making, he claims, are *normative* mistakes, that is, they are wrong about what counts in favour of what.

Enoch (and McPherson) remains unsatisfied:

Of course, [counter-reasons] are not as *normatively* respectable as reasons are. And so those acting on them are to be criticized for not acting on the reasons that apply to them. But then again, reasons aren't as *counter-normatively* respectable as counter-reasons are, and we may be counter-criticizable for failing to act on the counter-reasons that apply to us. (Enoch 2011: 125)

The complaint: the counter-reasoner can make a *symmetrical* response to Scanlon's. But, Enoch and McPherson claim, more traditional non-naturalism can say something that Scanlon's relaxed realism apparently cannot: 'the reasoners – and not the [counter-reasoners] – track the normative structure of reality [...] their way of thinking about reality is *inapt*' (Enoch & McPherson 2017: 835–836).

But as I've argued relaxed realism can be interpreted, it is unclear why Scanlon cannot say this. In fact, relaxed realism has a clear way of explaining what it would mean to say that the counter-reasoners way of thinking about reality is *inapt*. Assuming that there is some particular way that normative properties and relations exist then, if, as Enoch and McPherson grant, the counter-reason domain makes claims about what reasons there are – and what counter-reasons there are – that conflict with those we have sufficient reason to accept in the normative domain, then the counter-reasons domain is failing to track the structure of *normative reality*. 'Epistemically speaking', as Enoch and McPherson (2017: 836) put it, everything is *not* 'fine with the [counter-

reasoners]’, they are employing mistaken means to ascertain what normative properties and relations there are (and have false normative beliefs).

Enoch and McPherson may object that this is just Scanlon’s normative response repeated. But that would be to miss the role of ontological pluralism here. The claims of the counter-reasoners conflict with those of the normative domain or they do not. If they do, then the counter-reason domain is making claims about what exists in the way that entities only in the normative domain do. If so, then we should reject claims about counter-reasons because they are unjustified and false claims about what reasons there are. This makes the counter-reasons domain, as Scanlon puts it, a ‘normative fiction’: a way of talking *as if* certain reasons existed when they do not.

If they do not conflict, then the question becomes whether there are any entities that exist in whatever way is supposed to be unique to the counter-reason domain. If not, then talk of counter-reasons is confused: there are no counter-reasons because nothing meets the condition of existence supposedly associated with that domain. In that respect, they fail to capture the structure of *counter-normative reality* because there simply are no counter-reasons. And if something does exist in the relevant way, then there are counter-reasons. But Scanlon, as Enoch and McPherson should agree, would and should be sceptical that one can characterise what the supposedly unique way of existing enjoyed by counter-reasons is that will not reveal that the domain is making claims about normative properties and relations. Any insistence that we should be able to talk about tracking the ‘structure of reality’ *simpliciter*, going beyond a merely disjunctive notion of existence that Scanlon grants, is to beg the question against relaxed realism.

This response helps fend off Enoch’s and McPherson’s related worry that Scanlon’s view looks indistinguishable from a form of fictionalism about normativity. It helps first, though, to

see how the relaxed realist would deny that there is a *fictional domain*. For fictional objects, we might think, simply do not exist – fictional objects enjoy no way of existing. Instead, as Scanlon himself says, we might suggest that fictions involve ‘speaking of things of a certain kind *as if* they had properties appropriate to things of that kind, but with the presupposition that they are not in fact things of that kind with those properties’ (Scanlon 2017: 888).

Scanlon continues: ‘the kind of existence and the properties in question are domain specific. For example, a fiction about human beings talks about human beings that have properties such as spatio-temporal location, height and weight [...] but with the presupposition that they are not in fact things of that kind with those properties’ (Scanlon 2017: 888). So, the natural domain is not a fiction because we take it that things have the aforementioned properties and do not presuppose that they actually do not.

The same is true, Scanlon thinks, of the mathematical and the normative domains. If someone engages in mathematical practice and believes that there are correct and incorrect ways of doing mathematics, then there ‘is no property of *numbers* left for that person to be a fictionalist about’ (Scanlon 2017: 888). Analogously, if we regard some considerations as counting in favour of certain actions and attitudes (and hold that there are correct and incorrect answers to this), then, Scanlon thinks, there is nothing left for us to accept or deny that would make us fictionalists about reasons. We might write ‘normative fiction’ and suggest that certain things count in favour of particular actions or attitudes on the presupposition that they in fact do not. But that falls short of fictionalism about the normative since we would be presupposing that there are facts about what is or is not a reason independent of any such fiction. The important point, then, is to see that the relaxed realist is offering a *reinterpretation* of what fictionalism about *x could be* assuming their subject-matter-based meta-metaphysics. A non-question-begging

response requires either arguing that this meta-metaphysical view is confused or disputing this account of fictionalism.

Some, however, might think that the view I've read out of Scanlon here is not his. For, they might claim, first that it is widely assumed that domains are the explanatorily basic feature of relaxed realism, whereas it seems that I am suggesting that it is ways of existing. Second, that Scanlon is read by many as committed to a 'metaphysically lightweight', 'thin' and 'less ontologically committal' form of normative realism and what I've offered here may seem inconsistent with this.¹⁵⁰

Strictly speaking, my concern is with the most plausible and defensible form of relaxed realism and its background meta-metaphysics that can be read out of Scanlon's work. So, if what I've suggested here is not Scanlon's view, this is no objection as such. However, I do think that both worries betray instructive misunderstandings of *Scanlon's* relaxed realism.

First, on domains. It seemed *prima facie* plausible that domains were 'at the heart of Scanlon's metaphilosophy' (Enoch & McPherson 2017: 822), given how Scanlon (2014) presents relaxed realism and that we were not told precisely what domains are. But Scanlon has since told us that he simply meant that there are different subject matters by talk of domains, and that since he was only concerned with making claims about three different subject matters – natural, normative, and mathematical – he 'might have done better simply to make [his] claims about these subjects and avoid the more general idea of a domain altogether' (Scanlon 2017: 880). I agree. For, first, the notion of a subject matter is too explanatorily impotent for Scanlon's purposes. It, for example, offers no explanation of *why* ontological claims about a specific subject

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Böddeling (2020), Ridge (2019: 152–155), Enoch & McPherson (2017: 821–822), Golub (2017: 1389; 2021: 152), Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014: 400), Wodak (2017).

matter have proprietary standards that settle (in both senses) what exists. Second, given what he says in response to the domain of domains and what I've argued those claims do for his view, focussing on developing his apparent ontological pluralism would have been more helpful.

Second, I do not think that there is any helpful sense in which Scanlon's view is 'metaphysically lightweight', 'thin', or 'less ontologically committal'. Scanlon accepts that existential quantification is ontologically committing and he thinks there are true existentially quantified (pure) normative claims. What is importantly different between Scanlon's relaxed realism and, say, the non-naturalism of Enoch, is that Scanlon thinks that normative properties and relations exist in a different way from, for example, those in the natural domain *and* that the criteria for theory choice in normative metaphysics differs from criteria for theory choice in other ontological and metaphysical debates.

Nor does Scanlon himself state that his view is 'metaphysically thin'. In considering whether his view of existence is too 'minimal' or 'thin', he asks what a 'thick' notion would be. He grants that entities which exist in the natural domain seem to involve some 'thick' notion of existence (e.g., spatio-temporal location or causal standing), but says that this is just what existence in the natural domain amounts to (Scanlon 2014: 28). Unclear talk of 'thickness', then, is not something 'provided by some further idea of metaphysical reality over and above' a given subject matter but, instead, the thickness (or, as he sometime says, the 'content') of existence claims is provided by whatever the criteria of existence for some domain is (Scanlon 2014: 28).

I grant, however, that sometimes Scanlon speaks as if he is willing to accept various forms of minimalism about normative belief, truth, facts, and properties.¹⁵¹ This might be what

¹⁵¹ See, for example, passages of Scanlon (2014) quoted in Ridge (2019: 154–155).

some take to make his view ‘metaphysically thin’. I think (Scanlon 2014) contains sufficient ambiguity that it admits of different readings, as Enoch and McPherson have illustrated. If Scanlon does accept such minimalisms, I’ve established that they are dispensable commitments. For notice they play *no* role in the view as I’ve developed it. Scanlon could, for example, defend non-minimal normative properties by, first, suggesting that they exist in a different way from non-minimal natural properties. Then, arguing that objections to such properties mistakenly assume that if they exist they must have spatio-temporal location or causal standing, or that objections to them illicitly appeal to some criteria for theory choice ill-suited to the normative domain.¹⁵²

I have argued that reading Scanlon’s talk of different ways of existing as commitment to ontological pluralism offers the clearest and most plausible formulation of the general meta-metaphysical view that he takes to justify relaxed realism. There remain, however, two serious challenges for relaxed realism.

§4. Two Challenges

§4.1. Ontological Pluralism Revisited

The primary challenge that relaxed realism faces is to clarify and argue for a form of ontological pluralism. This is a substantial task and Scanlon nowhere cites any work on ontological pluralism. As mentioned, the view is often thought not only false but ‘silly or confused’ (McDaniel 2017: 48). So, there is much work to be done for *any* form of ontological pluralism to be taken as even *prima facie* plausible.

¹⁵² Moreover, those concerned about the relationship between relaxed realism and quasi-realism should see this as a consideration in favour of my account of relaxed realism since, in rejecting such minimalism, it avoids collapse into quasi-realism.

Ontological pluralism can be formulated in many ways. How depends upon at least, (a) whether existence is primitive, (b) whether claims of the form ‘x exists’ are best understood as second-order claims about concepts, properties, or propositional functions such that they are best captured by existential quantification or not, (c) whether existence is a property, (d) if existence is a property, whether it is a first-order or second-order property, (e) how many different ways of existing there are, and (f) what enjoys these different ways of existing.¹⁵³

Now, as Zoltán Szabó, puts it,

The standard view nowadays is that we can adequately capture the meaning of sentences like ‘There are Fs’, ‘Some things are Fs’, or ‘Fs exist’ through existential quantification. As a result, not much credence is given to the idea that we must distinguish between different kinds [...] of existence. (Szabó 2003: 13)

But McDaniel and Turner have illustrated how one can accept that view and *still* accept some form of ontological pluralism. This is important for us since Scanlon’s relaxed realist *also* accepts these Quinean claims regarding quantification. As Turner says,

[...] why think there is only one existential quantifier? If there were multiple existential quantifiers, then why wouldn’t there be multiple ways of being, or kinds of existence—one for each of the quantifiers? (Turner 2012: 421)

It is important to see that McDaniel and Turner are not suggesting that we introduce multiple existential quantifiers that are *mere restrictions* of the unrestricted quantifier, like the ‘all’ in

¹⁵³ See McDaniel (2017: Chapters 1 & 2) for helpful discussion.

Lewis's 'all the beer is in the fridge'. Rather, the suggestion is that there are multiple, semantically primitive existential quantifiers for each way of existing. This notion of semantically primitive quantifier is Eli Hirsch's,

[...] quantifiers that, because of the semantic rules implicit in a language, are restricted in their range in certain specific ways. If the quantifiers in a language are semantically restricted, they are always limited in their range, regardless of the conversational context. (Hirsch 2005: 76)

The suggestion: there are existential quantifiers that range over non-overlapping domains in virtue of their meaning, and which cannot have their semantic content broken down into an equivalent translation with an unrestricted quantifier and a restricting predicate. If they could be so broken down, that would be to make *ways of existing* properties of objects as opposed to ways something can exist. Rather, the relevant quantifier-meanings are primitive.

A final piece is needed, since the ontological monist may respond that all the ontological pluralist has now offered is a different way of *talking about* what exists. For the monist can translate anything the pluralist says with an unrestricted quantifier and a restricting predicate. The solution McDaniell offers is to appeal to the notion of naturalness owed to David Lewis (1983; 1986). That notion suggests that there are certain properties that better 'carve nature at the joints', in Plato's phrase, than others. For example, the property *is an electron* is *more* natural than the merely disjunctive property *is an electron or is loved by Saul Kripke*.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ For discussion, see Dorr & Hawthorne (2013).

McDaniel follows Theodore Sider (2009; 2011) in extending this notion of naturalness from properties to *linguistic expressions*.¹⁵⁵ Consider a world divided by a line down its centre where everything to the left is white and everything to the right is black. A linguistic community that used the pair of predicates ‘is white’ and ‘is black’ to refer to everything exactly to the left and right of the line respectively, as opposed to a pair of predicates ‘is whack’ and ‘is bhite’ that divided the world according to some diagonal line, we might think, are using predicates that *better capture* the *structure* of the world they are describing (Berto & Plebani 2015: 57–58).

McDaniel suggest that *quantifiers* can also be more or less natural than others. On that view, there are different ways of existing if there are possible meanings for semantically primitive restricted quantifiers that each have a non-empty domain that is part of the domain of the unrestricted quantifier, that these domains do not overlap, and that the meaning of each of these quantifiers is at least as natural as that of the unrestricted quantifier. This view also allows that there is an intelligible, unrestricted quantifier that is defined as a disjunction of the other quantifiers the pluralist thinks have at least or more natural meanings than it.¹⁵⁶

Importantly, this view is consistent with reifying quantifier-meanings – as, for example, second-order properties of properties, concepts, or propositional functions – or not. On the former, quantifier-meanings are, for example, primitive properties expressed by quantifiers. The latter can be done by a nominalist regimentation of talk of primitive expressions in one’s theory. For example, Sider introduces a *betterness* distinction as applied to whole (interpreted) languages: ‘languages are better or worse depending on how closely they cleave to the structure of the world’ (Sider 2009: 403). We could then say that a language that employs the pluralist’s

¹⁵⁵ Lewis (1986: 60–61) also thought that predicates whose extension was a class of properties could be more or less natural depending upon how similar the members of the class were (he took similarity to be primitive).

¹⁵⁶ The view thus avoids Gareth Matthew’s (1972) sense-kind confusion objection.

quantifiers is a *better language* to speak, since its quantifiers better ‘carve nature at the joints’ than the quantifiers of other languages.

McDaniel offers a sophisticated formulation of ontological pluralism the relaxed realist could adopt. The problem, however, is that McDaniel’s view takes the meanings of existential quantifiers as *primitive*. This means that there are no (non-circular) necessary and sufficient conditions that characterise what it amounts to for something to exist. That is a serious problem for the relaxed realist. For such conditions are supposed to provide the ‘standard’ that metaphysically settles whether something exists in a domain. Moreover, such criteria are supposed to justify adopting domain-specific criteria for theory choice to (epistemologically) settle domain-specific ontological and metaphysical debates. But this version of ontological pluralism is *silent* on what those criteria are, so it offers no help in developing and justifying those commitments of relaxed realism.

So, the relaxed realist needs to adopt a form of ontological pluralism that denies that existence is primitive and takes seriously the project of delineating necessary and sufficient conditions for existence. As Aaron Cotnoir and Douglas Edwards (2015: 119–123) have argued, doing so is independently motivated.¹⁵⁷ Suppose that we asked what it amounts to for an object to exist. One plausible view we’ve already seen is:

(Alexander’s Dictum) x exists if and only if x has causal powers. (AD)

(AD) looks promising for concrete objects. But consider abstracta, which are often defined as lacking causal powers and/or spatio-temporal location. (AD) entails that they do not

¹⁵⁷ The coming problem is an analogue of the scope problem for truth in the truth literature (see Lynch 2009; Sher 2004; Edwards 2018: 105–107).

exist. Insisting on (AD) would entail a radical nominalism that we may wish to avoid. So, alternatively, consider,

(Neo-Fregean Principle) x exists if and only if x is the referent of a singular term that appears in a true sentence. (NFP)

This view, often associated with neo-Fregeans Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (2005), has been entertained as an account of existence *simpliciter*.¹⁵⁸ It may also seem a plausible account of the existence of abstract objects. But, as Cotnoir and Edwards emphasise, it is seemingly much less plausible that what it amounts to for tables and chairs – or concreta more generally – *to exist* is that they are the referents of singular terms in true sentences.

We might take the trouble with (AD) and (NFP) to demotivate the project of searching for necessary and sufficient conditions for existence. But we might instead take these failures to motivate thinking there to be different necessary and sufficient conditions for existence met by different entities. It is this motivation that the relaxed realist might lean upon: taking the project of criteria for existence seriously and suggesting a form of ontological pluralism that offers criteria for existence for the natural, normative, and mathematical domains.

The problem, however, is that it is difficult to see what the details of such a view would look like. Scanlon does not help us here. In the natural domain, he is relatively clear: ‘For physical objects to exist is for them to have spatio-temporal location, to have various physical properties, and to interact causally with other objects’ (Scanlon 2014: 28). But on how mathematical objects and normative properties and relations exist he is less clear. We might look

¹⁵⁸ See Cotnoir & Edwards (2015: 120–121); Eklund (2006b); Hawley (2007); and Sider (2007).

to the disjunction he takes the general notion of existence to concern. There we find no criteria for existence, however, but instead just a list of things that Scanlon thinks exists: ‘the things that are either a physical object, or a number, or a set, or ...’ (Scanlon 2017: 883). He continues: ‘To belong to the extension of this disjunction is not to have a further property of existence over and above what is attributed to a thing by a true existential statement within one or another of these domains’ (Scanlon 2017: 883). The problem is that Scanlon does not tell us what *is* so attributed.

It might seem obvious that the relaxed realist can adopt the non-primitivist ontological pluralism Cotnoir and Edwards envisage: something exists if and only if it either has causal powers or is the referent of a singular term in a true sentence. Suppose the relaxed realist does. We can then ask: what is the disjunct of that disjunction which they take to be the criterion of existence in the normative domain?

The relaxed realist denies that it is causal powers since they deny any reduction of the normative to the natural. This leaves them with the suggestion that normative properties and relations exist if and only if they are the referent of a singular term in a true sentence. That looks promising, until we realise that this is also the criterion of existence that is being suggested on this view for *mathematical* entities too.

For that is a fatal problem for relaxed realism as we have developed it. To see why, recall that the promising reading of relaxed realism above takes it that the ‘standards’ of a domain are supposed to be determined by the criteria of existence of entities that the relevant subject matter concerns, and that what makes subject matters differ is that they concern things that exist in different ways.

But now if mathematical and normative entities are supposed to have the same criteria for existence, then, first, this means that the standards that settle (in either sense) metaphysical and ontological questions are the same in the mathematical and normative domains. But on relaxed realism, this is false: calculation does not generate justification for moral beliefs, nor does reflection on, for example, the moral status of believing $2+2=4$ justify that mathematical claim. Moreover, those are clearly independently implausible claims. Second, the subject matters of mathematics and of normativity *collapse* into the same subject matter if they concern the same way of existing.¹⁵⁹

So, a serious challenge remains even granting more sophisticated forms of ontological pluralism: what is the way of existing for entities in the normative domain? There may be plausible answers here that secure everything relaxed realism offers. Is it plausible, for example, that x exists in the normative domain if and only if x counts in favour of some act or attitude? This is unobvious, though if plausible it may, in conjunction with (AD) for the natural and (NFP) for the mathematical, offer a tripartite ontological pluralism that offers what relaxed realism needs. But the question whether this works will have to await another occasion.

§4.2. The Anti-Exceptionalism Challenge

A virtue of my reading of relaxed realism is that it extracts an argument from Scanlon as to why there are no domain-independent criteria for theory choice. In premised form,

(P1) The criteria for theory choice in ontology and metaphysics are determined by the criterion of existence for the domain (subject matter) that those theories concern.

¹⁵⁹ Thus Veluwenkamp (2017) is mistaken that relaxed realism can plausibly adopt (NFP) for normative entities.

(P2) There are domain-independent criteria for theory choice in ontology and metaphysics only if there is a domain-independent criterion of existence which is not merely disjunctive.

(P3) There is no plausible, domain-independent criterion of existence which is not merely disjunctive.

(C) So, there are no domain-independent criteria for theory choice in ontology and metaphysics (that is, no one set of epistemological standards that determine when we have good epistemic reason to believe metaphysical and ontological claims).

If sound, (C) entails that we cannot employ the same criteria across domains and, for example, argue, even if some claim that entails that x exists seems plausible in domain D, that said claim might still be false because of some more general metaphysical considerations.

The problem is that Scanlon does not engage with the best rationale for rejecting (P1) and (P2). To see it, return to the view sketched at the beginning of this chapter. According to that view, what exists and its nature obviously depends upon the subject matter in question. But, whilst silent on ways of existing, the view maintains that we should employ one set of criteria for theory choice to epistemologically settle what ontological and metaphysical views we should accept: formalise theories to clarify their ontological commitments, then adopt the theory which is best supported by considerations of empirical adequacy, intuitive plausibility, and other theoretical virtues such as relative simplicity and explanatory power.

The independent plausibility of this view, *pace* Scanlon, need not depend upon there being only one way to exist. If so, then (P1) and (P2) are false. For we would have good reason

to accept some one set of criteria for theory choice without appeal to criteria for existence *and* that these criteria are those appropriate for answering *any* metaphysical or ontological question regardless of what it amounts to for something to exist.

The motivation: *anti-exceptionalism* about normative meta-metaphysics. Call anti-exceptionalism about x the view that there is nothing saliently different about x to warrant thinking it different to a more general y that should apply in x 's case.¹⁶⁰ For example, anti-exceptionalism about normative semantics is the view that a general semantic theory which works for non-normative language will also work for normative language. Anti-exceptionalism about normative *meta*-metaphysics says that a general meta-metaphysical view that works for theorising about non-normative metaphysics should also be adopted when doing normative metaphysics.

The rationale that someone attracted to the view sketched in §2 can offer is anti-exceptionalism about normative meta-metaphysics. They may suggest that the criteria for theory choice of empirical adequacy, intuitive support, and theoretical virtues such as simplicity and explanatory power, are those that we are *generally* justified in employing when we do metaphysics *simpliciter*.

The reasons why will differ amongst those who find it attractive. But one option is to think that these criteria for theory choice are unexceptional in being simply those criteria appropriate for *any* theorising at all, including in the natural sciences. Scanlon might object that this simply ignores important differences between different subject matters. But this is false. For the view that all theorising involves employing these general criteria for theory choice does not

¹⁶⁰ See Williamson (Forthcoming) for defence of a form of anti-exceptionalism in meta-ethics.

entail that each criterion is *always helpful* in every dispute, that theories must all *explain the same phenomena*, or that all criteria have the same *weighting* regardless of subject matter.

For example, theories in the natural sciences are apt for assessment in terms of empirical adequacy because such theories concern empirical phenomena, whilst normative metaphysical theories may not be because the empirical data is plausibly consistent with all competing views. If so, then that criterion might be unhelpful in settling normative metaphysical debates. Relatedly, a quantum mechanical theory must explain very different data to a normative metaphysical theory given that they concern different subjects. Perhaps too intuitive support is a weightier consideration in normative metaphysics than in the natural sciences. But, even if so, this is all consistent with taking there to be a single set of criteria for theory choice that determine when we have good reason to believe a theory – including in any metaphysical debate.

We are now in *very* difficult territory where it is hard to see how to proceed without begging the question. Notice, however, that the availability of this kind of rationale puts the pressure back on the relaxed realist to answer two questions: *why* should we think that the ‘epistemological standards’ in metaphysics and ontology depend upon criteria for existence? And why should we think that domain-independent criteria for theory choice in metaphysics depend upon a not-merely-disjunctive single way of existing?

This second question is especially difficult because most contemporary ontological pluralists do not think that accepting different ways of existing, and a merely-disjunctive general way in which anything exists, demotivates domain-independent criteria for theory choice. For example, McDaniel (2017) treats the different ways of existing he posits as primitive and develops theories that admit of different ways of existing across various debates in metaphysics – time, ontological categories, *inter alia*. He then explores whether they fare well according to one

set of criteria for theory choice similar to those we began this chapter with. So, at present, no answer to these two questions – which the relaxed realist needs – is forthcoming.

§5. Conclusion

In §2, I introduced Scanlon's relaxed realism, sketched a meta-metaphysical picture that the view rejects, and isolated some importantly unclear details of relaxed realism's meta-metaphysics. I argued, in §3, that this lacuna is best filled by attention to an often-ignored feature of relaxed realism: its acceptance of ontological pluralism. I turned in §4 to argue that, despite this, two significant challenges remain that there is reason to doubt relaxed realism can meet: providing a plausible, proprietary form of ontological pluralism, and undermining more general motivations for the meta-metaphysical picture relaxed realism rejects. Whether these challenges can be met requires further attention but now, I hope, they can rightly be seen as the issues to which we must turn to resolve the dispute between relaxed realists and their opponents.

I conclude with three positive consequences. The first is that the foregoing unearths a disagreement that simmers beneath the surface of normative metaphysics. This is, roughly, over what we might call existence-first and theory-first ways of doing normative metaphysics. Relaxed realism, as I've understood it, is an example of the former, where existence is in some sense primary in metaphysical and ontological debates, shaping, for example, what we think the appropriate methodology to do normative metaphysics is. It is much more common to assume the evaluation of general theories by some criteria for theory choice is how we should best do normative metaphysics, especially given the widespread assumption that existence is primitive, which robs us of criteria for existence that we might use to 'guide' ontological and metaphysical debate. Normative metaphysics has much to gain from explicitly engaging in this debate over the epistemology of metaphysics – no less than the correct methodology to do normative metaphysics is at stake.

Second, contemporary meta-ethics has proceeded on the widespread implicit assumption that there is only one way of existing. The literature on ways of existing too, however, is yet to seriously consider whether reflection on normativity can motivate some version of that view. This chapter has provided reason to think this mutual neglect a mistake. Redressing it is necessary to evaluate relaxed realism. But there are many other possible forms of ontological pluralism in meta-ethics that are yet to be explored too, and those more interested in ontological pluralism *simpliciter* may find in normativity an interesting test case for the view.

Finally, the foregoing should pressure those who reject Scanlon's theory to tell us what *their* background meta-metaphysical and meta-ontological commitments are and *why* they hold them, including whether they accept ontological monism and/or take existence to be primitive. Discussion of Scanlon's relaxed realism has focused on the positive details (or lack thereof) of its normative metaphysical and general meta-metaphysical commitments. But it is reasonable, especially given that many of the central questions taken to doom relaxed realism can in principle be responded to, that the relaxed realist press their opponents to outline their opposing view in the level of detail rightly requested of the relaxed realist. Such discussion would itself be important progress in normative metaphysics. It may even reveal that the foundations upon which the relaxed realist's opponents stand are no more secure than those which they attack.

Chapter 5

The Argument from the Possibility of Wholesale Moral Error

§1. Introduction

The perceived threat of the moral error theory motivates much meta-ethics.¹⁶¹ Many assume that morality *could* be subject to some form of error of the kind that would make the moral error theory true. Moral error theorists think this error actual, others do not. Regardless, it does seem that it is in some sense *possible* that the moral error theory is true.

We commonly understand the error theory as suggesting that moral practice involves some metaphysical or ontological presuppositions that are not met. For example, that moral truths require non-natural moral facts or that there are categorical reason relations. It is striking that non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, and relaxed realism throw this understanding of the error theory into doubt.

Non-realist cognitivism denies that the truth of (pure) normative propositions depends upon the existence of anything. How, then, could it be possible that all moral claims are false? Irrealist cognitivism rejects truthmaking altogether, adding that reason relations are non-existent objects. Can such a view make sense of the error theory? Relaxed realism entails that the possibility of the error theory depends upon the standards of the normative domain entailing an error theory. What could an error theory look like on this view?

Still, many will think the apparent possibility of the error theory easily acceptable by all. This is not so. In this chapter, I broaden the scope of my discussion and offer a novel argument

¹⁶¹ This chapter is an extended and revised version of (Akhlaghi 2021a) published in *Ratio*.

based on another deeply neglected topic: the *epistemic possibility* of the moral error theory.¹⁶² The argument targets any form of moral non-cognitivism and naturalism. It *also* targets each of the views explored in Chapters 1–4. Finally, it provides reason to believe Parfit’s infamous conditional: that if there are no non-natural moral truths, then nothing matters.

I proceed as follows. In §2, I present my argument. I respond to three objections in §3. I argue, in §4–§6 respectively, that, if true, non-cognitivism, naturalism, and the other views above cannot capture the epistemic possibility of the moral error theory, completing the defence of my argument. I conclude in §7 by drawing out the argument’s aforementioned consequence and explaining that, even if those targeted remain unmoved by my argument, this only helps to highlight its significance.

§2. The Argument

Where ‘X’ stands for a meta-ethical theory, this is the schematic *argument from the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error*,

(P1) It is an epistemic possibility that morality is subject to some wholesale error that would make the moral error theory true.

(P2) If (P1), then it is an adequacy condition on meta-ethical theories that they allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of such error.

(P3) X cannot allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of such error.

(C) So, X is false.

¹⁶² For discussion of the also-neglected issue of the metaphysical modal status of the error theory, see Coons (2011), Brown (2013), and Kalf (2015).

By *wholesale error*, I mean some error that permeates a discourse such that all of the claims within that discourse are false or that they are all subject to a false presupposition. This kind of error is what afflicts astrology: astrology is committed to some claims, such as the causal influence of celestial bodies on human personalities, which are false and so render the entire discourse defective. By wholesale *moral error*, I mean some error that runs through morality such that the moral error theory is true and either all (atomic) moral propositions are false (Mackie 1977) or that they are all subject to a false presupposition (Kalf 2018).

The *epistemic possibility* of wholesale moral error would mean that, for all we know, an error sufficient to make the moral error theory true obtains. On this view, some proposition p is epistemically possible just in case p 's truth is consistent with all we know. My argument does not depend upon any account of epistemic possibility. It can be unproblematically recast with other accounts, such as a probabilistic one on which p is epistemically possible when, given our evidence, p has a non-zero evidential probability of being true.¹⁶³ On that account, (P1) is the plausible claim that, given our evidence, the probability of the moral error theory being true is above zero. I will occasionally talk in terms of this account to help illustrate my claims below. Returning to astrology: it was once an epistemic possibility that astrology was a non-defective practice. For example, before coming to know its falsity – and thus the epistemic impossibility of astrology being non-defective – the causal influence of celestial objects on human personalities *could* have been true.

For all we know, moral practice is subject to the kind of error that would make the moral error theory true. Denying this has three unwelcome consequences. The first: it ascribes to moral error theorists an epistemic failure, namely, that they fail to realise that we *already know* that the

¹⁶³ See Huemer (2007) for discussion of these and alternative accounts.

moral error theory is false. But not only is this uncharitable, it seems *prima facie* false to think either that the error of the error-theorist is epistemic in this sense, or that the error theory is immediately refuted by reflection on what we know.

Second, it suggests that morality is somehow self-protecting from sceptical worries about itself. For to suggest that wholesale moral error is epistemically impossible is to claim that morality is guaranteed to evade wholesale error. But this is, *prima facie*, implausible. For example, mere appeal to the fact that moral judgements are made, criticised, and the like – or our knowledge of this – does not show that there are no plausible error-theoretic worries to be had about morality.

This self-protection is especially objectionable for a reason that is the third unwelcome consequence of denying (P1). For if moral practice is taken to be self-protecting against error-theoretic worries, then it is unclear how to distinguish between clearly confused domains of discourse (such as astrology) and morality. The clearest way to do so is to show how one (epistemically) *could* formulate an error-theory for either domain, before showing why one domain seems clearly subject to wholesale error whilst the other is disputable.

For at least these reasons, we should accept (P1). But they are also reasons to accept (P2). If a meta-ethical theory does not allow for and explain how it epistemically could be that morality is subject to wholesale error, then it faces the above worries. Of course, many meta-ethical theories entail that this epistemic possibility is not realised and that the error theory is false. But that is consistent with a requirement upon them to show how it epistemically *could be* that the error theory is true.

The moral error theory obviously allows for the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. And it explains how such error could obtain by maintaining that there are some alleged commitment(s) of moral discourse – such as commitment to irreducibly moral phenomena – which could be, and which they argue are, false.

Traditional moral non-naturalism also allows for and explains the possibility of wholesale moral error. For the non-naturalist asserts that moral practice has certain commitments, such as to irreducibly moral facts, which epistemically *could* be false but, the non-naturalist argues, are not. And crucially, as we'll see, non-naturalism allows for an explanation of how the error theory epistemically could be true even if non-naturalism is true.

I argue that no form of *non-cognitivism* or *moral naturalism* can do so. Nor can *non-realist cognitivism*, *irrealist cognitivism*, or *relaxed realism*. (P3) should thus be read as:

(P3) Non-cognitivism, moral naturalism, non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, and relaxed realism cannot allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

If so, given (P1) and (P2), they are false. To be clear: my argument is not that these theories, if true, entail moral error theory false. Rather, it is that, if true, they cannot make sense of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error (whilst moral error theory and 'robust' non-naturalism can).

§3. Three Objections

One might suspect that any theorist can *easily* allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. How? By being fallibilists about their own theories: suggesting that their

theories might be false, and, if so, then the error theory could be true. If such an easy explanation is available, then (P3) is false.

But no such explanation is available. For a meta-ethical theory to allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error, their explanation must be one they can provide *by the lights of their own theory*. For example, for a naturalist *qua* naturalist to have an explanation of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error requires them to provide an explanation that is consistent with the truth of naturalism. If they must withhold assent from, or deny, their own theory to explain this possibility, then they are providing no explanation of it *qua* naturalist.

Whilst its truth would entail that there is no wholesale moral error, moral non-naturalism nicely illustrates how a non-error-theory, even if true, can have the resources to show how wholesale moral error is epistemically possible. As we'll see, this is by maintaining that moral practice has certain commitments the falsity of which would have entailed wholesale moral error, and that the reason why these commitments are true preserves the epistemic possibility that they are false.

A second objection: suppose, say, fallibilist naturalists cannot provide an explanation of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error, *qua* naturalist, by pointing out that their theories might be false. Does withholding full commitment not allow such *theorists* some explanation of how, for all we know, it could be that moral error theory is true, namely, that their own theories might be false? If so, this might suggest it is not an adequacy condition on meta-ethical *theories* that they allow for and explain our target possibility and that (P2) is false.

Rather, perhaps it is *meta-ethicists* as epistemic agents who should do this. If there is some epistemic possibility, E, and if an agent, x, who endorses a theory, T, can make sense of E – despite T’s entailing E is not realised – by withholding full confidence in T, then why think T *itself* must be able to account for and explain E? Why would x simply withholding full confidence in, and from claiming to know, T not suffice?

Because, as I’ve argued, meta-ethical *theories* that do not allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error, if true, implausibly imply that the error theorist commits a straightforward epistemic mistake, suggest that morality is self-protecting from external sceptical worries, and rob us of the clearest way to distinguish morality and clearly confused domains of discourse. To avoid such consequences, it is meta-ethical theories *themselves* that must allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

But, finally, perhaps *any* non-error theorist can explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale error without denying their theory this way. Whilst their theory entails the error theory is false, the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error remains and remains explainable because, as fallibilists about their own theory, any given non-error-theory is consistent with the epistemic possibility of its falsity. If so, (P3) is false.

To explain: let ‘T’ be any non-error-theory, ‘E’ be wholesale moral error, and ‘EP(x)’ be that x is epistemically possible and that this possibility is explainable. We are asking if some non-error-theory, T, can capture EP(E), given that T and that T entails $\neg E$. And this could be done without denying T, so long as we assume that T is consistent with the epistemic possibility of its falsity: that is, that $[T \ \& \ EP(\neg T)]$ is consistent.

This assumption may be intuitively plausible, and T and $EP(\neg T)$ are obviously logically consistent. But to assume that they are consistent beyond mere logical consistency is question-begging here. For the question now becomes whether T is consistent with $EP(\neg T)$ given T and that T entails $\neg E$, for some non-error theory T . And if the reason why a *specific* non-error-theory entails $\neg E$ *also entails* that $\neg EP(E)$, then this would entail that T and $EP(\neg T)$ *are* inconsistent, since the $EP(\neg T)$ requires $EP(E)$.

To illustrate, let 'NN' be non-naturalism. NN entails $\neg E$. NN can explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error if $[NN \ \& \ EP(\neg NN)]$ is consistent. So, we must ask if NN entails $\neg E$ in a way that also entails $\neg EP(E)$. And it does not: NN entails $\neg E$ because it entails that there are non-natural moral facts. But NN *also* allows that there are certain non-naturalist presuppositions about morality which, if false, would entail the error theory. And, crucially, *why* it entails $\neg E$ is consistent with $EP(E)$ because, for all we know, there may be no non-natural moral facts (or: given our evidence, the probability of non-natural moral facts not existing is above zero). So, NN is consistent with $EP(\neg NN)$, since NN is also consistent with $EP(E)$.¹⁶⁴

Let 'N' be naturalism. This objection to (P3) succeeds if, for example, $[N \ \& \ EP(\neg N)]$ is consistent. So, we ask: assuming N, and given that it entails $\neg E$, does it do so in a way that also entails that $\neg EP(E)$? If so, then this provides an argument that $[N \ \& \ EP(\neg N)]$ is inconsistent. Why? Because the truth of N would entail $\neg EP(E)$, and $\neg EP(E)$ itself entails that $\neg EP(\neg N)$ since, as a non-error-theory, it is a necessary condition of the epistemic possibility of its falsity that wholesale moral error is epistemically possible. *Mutatis mutandis* for the other theories (P3)

¹⁶⁴ Of course, if non-naturalism entailed that we *know* that non-naturalism is true, then it would entail wholesale moral error is epistemically impossible since we would know that no such error obtains. But the truth of non-naturalism does *not* entail that we know that non-naturalism is true. So that thought does not show that the non-naturalist cannot consistently say that even if their theory is true, for all we know it might be false (or that, given our evidence, the probability of the error theory being true is non-zero even if we accept non-naturalism).

concerns: if they entail the epistemic impossibility of their own falsity, then, for any non-error theory, $[T \ \& \ EP(\neg T)]$ is inconsistent.

In what follows, I argue that my target theories cannot allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error *on the supposition that they are true*. This is because, if true, they entail wholesale moral error not just false but, I argue, epistemically impossible and/or inexplicable. This shows that they not only cannot capture the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error if their theories are true, but they cannot do so by suggesting their theories (epistemically) could be false. For if true – in denying a necessary condition for the epistemic possibility of their own falsity – these theories actually entail that it is epistemically impossible for them to be false.

§4. Non-Cognitivism and Wholesale Moral Error

Now, for well-known reasons, there remains no uncontroversial account of the cognitivist/non-cognitivist divide. But on standard ways of distinguishing between them, non-cognitivists are unable to allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

Risking nostalgia for halcyon days past,

(Truth-apt): Cognitivism is the view that moral judgements are truth-apt beliefs. Non-cognitivism denies this, maintaining instead that moral judgements are non-truth-apt desire-like states.

During the time of Ayer's (1936) emotivism and Hare's (1952) prescriptivism, (Truth-apt) sufficed. And it suffices to show why these older forms of non-cognitivism rule out the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. For if moral claims are desire-like states such as

emotional responses, and are not truth-apt, then such a view cannot explain how it could be that there was some *error* in moral practice that would render all moral claims *false*.

Contemporary non-cognitivists claim they are able to consistently make sense of moral claims being true and expressing beliefs by appeal to *minimalism*: the sentence “‘*p*’ is true” expresses the same attitude as the sentence ‘*p*’, and a sentence expresses a belief iff it can be true. This allows them to claim that a sentence like ‘abortion is wrong’ expresses some non-cognitive attitude, like disapproval of abortion, whilst *also* expressing a *true belief*.

This suggests what is perhaps the most common way of casting our divide,

(Representation): Cognitivism claims that moral judgements aim to represent the world, and that whether they succeed depends wholly on whether the world has the moral features such judgements ascribe to them. Non-cognitivism denies this, maintaining instead that moral judgements do not aim to represent the world. (Streumer 2013: 452)

Something like this seems to distinguish cognitivism from the non-cognitivism that quasi-realists like Simon Blackburn (1984; 1993; 1998) and Allan Gibbard (2003) accept.¹⁶⁵ On, for example, Blackburn’s view, whilst moral judgements can be true and express beliefs in these minimal senses, moral judgements are expressions of non-cognitive attitudes of approval or disapproval.

¹⁶⁵ Of course, minimalism creeps. I cannot resolve that here. My coming claims, however, do not depend upon any particular resolution to it.

These quasi-realist forms of non-cognitivism cannot allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. We might think that allowing moral judgements to be (minimalistically) true or false would suffice for this. But that is a mistake.

For what is needed to *explain* how a domain of discourse could be in wholesale error is *more* than just allowing that claims within that domain could all be false (or subject to a false presupposition). Rather, one needs to show that there are some commitments of the domain *itself* that allow for, and whose falsity would *explain*, the kind of wholesale error that would entail an error theory for that domain.

The same holds of morality. It does not suffice to allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error for one to maintain that moral claims are all capable of (truth or) falsehood. Rather, we need an explanation for *how and why* they (epistemically) could *all* be false (or subject to a false presupposition).

Both the non-naturalist and the error theorist can provide this. The non-cognitivist of the quasi-realist variety cannot. For their view does not ascribe any commitments to the practice of morality the falsity of which would entail all moral claims are false or are subject to a false presupposition.

Take Blackburn's view: moral judgements express attitudes of approval and disapproval. Moral judgements can be minimalistically true and involve some form of projection of our non-cognitive attitudes onto actions and other morally evaluable things. This eliminates anything that could explain how and why it could be that all of our moral judgements are false, since they are only expressing our attitudes – even if, *in principle*, they could all be false.

One might object that this is too quick against contemporary non-cognitivism in quasi-realist garb. In particular, perhaps it is false that a theory needs to identify some commitment(s) of a discourse whose falsity would entail wholesale error in order to explain the possibility of such error.

An alternative: one's theory may have counterfactual implications which, if true, would explain how there could be wholesale moral error. For example, Blackburn's quasi-realist could suggest that *if* moral agents failed to express any attitudes of approval or disapproval, then all moral claims would be false or subject to some false presupposition.

This counterfactual strategy, even if workable, is of no help to the quasi-realist. This is because if quasi-realism accepted the counterfactual above, this would turn it into a response-dependence theory. But quasi-realists *emphatically* deny their view entails this, fearing the relativistic implications of response-dependence theories.¹⁶⁶ So, this move is unavailable to them.

The quasi-realist may now complain that I am assuming they think the existence of moral attitudes *suffices* for moral truth. But quasi-realists allow that *not all attitudes are equal*. Some attitudes are correct when approving of what is good, right, and the like, and others like that of the bigot or the racist based on inconsistency, cruel mindedness, 'immaturity, lack of imagination, bias, coarseness, and so on' are incorrect (Blackburn 1998: 313).

How then can quasi-realists understand *mistaken* moral attitudes? Unfortunately, quasi-realists refuse to provide any account of moral error. Responding to Andy Egan's (2007)

¹⁶⁶ Blackburn (1999) denies quasi-realism has any relativistic implications, takes quasi-realism to not be a form of response-dependence theory, and argues that 'the problem of relativism' is especially serious for (at least) 'response-dependent' theories.

objection that quasi-realists cannot explain certain kinds of individual moral error, Blackburn remarks:

[...] let us first consider [...] moral correctness, or [...] moral truth. Does the quasi-realist set about saying what this is? No. [...] Just as the quasi-realist avoids naturalistic reductions, so he avoids saying *what it is* for a moral claim to be true, except in boring homophonic or deflationary terms. [...] As with truth, so with error. Moral p is mistaken or erroneous if and only if $\neg p$ – and that is all that can be said. (Blackburn 2009: 207)

This leaves the quasi-realist with no explanation of how and why all moral attitudes epistemically could be false, even if it explains how some are.¹⁶⁷ Still, Blackburn does suggest that quasi-realists can accept this consistently with their truth-minimalism:

(Improvement) ‘If something is entrenched in anyone’s outlook, in such a way that nothing that is an improvement would undermine it, then it is true.’ (Blackburn 2009: 206)

By contraposition, then, quasi-realists can apparently say:

(C-Improvement) If something entrenched in anyone’s outlook is false, then there is something that is an improvement that would undermine it.

Giving us:

¹⁶⁷ I am charitably assuming that quasi-realists can make sense of *individual* moral judgements being false (Egan 2007 sparked heated debate over this, see Ridge 2015; Köhler 2015; Bex-Priestley 2018). Of course, if they cannot, then quasi-realism cannot explain the epistemic possibility of *wholesale* moral error.

(All-Improvement) If all moral attitudes entrenched in all of our outlooks are mistaken, then there is an improvement or set of improvements that would undermine all of our moral attitudes.

So, if it is epistemically possible that there is an improvement or set of improvements that would undermine *all* of our attitudes, perhaps quasi-realists can appeal to (All-Improvement) to explain the epistemic possibility of *wholesale* moral error.

What might such improvements be that epistemically could undermine *all* of our attitudes? There are two options:

(External) All moral attitudes may be undermined by some meta-ethical consideration(s).

(Internal) All moral attitudes may be undermined by some moral consideration(s).

(External) requires some feature or presupposition of morality that, for example, metaphysical inquiry could undermine, such as commitment to non-natural facts. We've seen that quasi-realists deny this. And whilst quasi-realists think some attitudes better than others, they deny that the explanation for this involves anything beyond normative theorising (Blackburn 1998: 311–313, 317–318).

The quasi-realist, however, might appeal to (Internal) and say: it is epistemically possible that we are systematically wrong about the correct normative ethics. That possibility might undermine *all* of our moral attitudes. Since quasi-realism is consistent with that epistemic possibility, it can allow for and explain wholesale moral error.

But suppose we all have mistaken moral attitudes because we are all deluded about what the correct normative ethical theory is. This alone would only show that *our current* moral attitudes are false. It would *not* show that *all adoptable* moral attitudes are false, since, assuming quasi-realism, there are still some correct moral attitudes one can adopt in line with the best normative ethics, even if *we* are wrong about which attitudes those are. But without *that* quasi-realism is not explaining the possibility of wholesale moral error, of *all* moral attitudes being mistaken.

Quasi-realists must, then, suggest that it is epistemically possible that our moral attitudes would be mistaken even after alignment with the best normative ethical theory. This would be straightforward if, like non-naturalism, quasi-realism recognised some presuppositions that, say, moral metaphysical enquiry could show mistaken. By denying this, quasi-realists can only appeal to normative considerations, saying: for all we know, the best normative ethical theory is one on which, for example, both racists and non-racists and bigots and non-bigots alike are mistaken.

That, I submit, is an epistemic impossibility. For we know that the attitudes of the non-racist or non-bigot are not ones that can be improved upon *as moral attitudes*. This is not to say, inconsistently with (P1), that it is epistemically impossible that there is wholesale moral error. Rather, it is to say that we know non-bigot and non-racist attitudes are not ones that can be *morally* improved upon, *even if* morality – for reasons quasi-realists deny – is subject to wholesale moral error and, say, wholly fictional. Since this appeal to a moral improvement that would undermine all our moral attitudes relies upon the epistemic impossibility that we can improve some clearly *morally unimprovable* attitudes, quasi-realism cannot explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

Blackburn's quasi-realist takes themselves to 'stand on one part of the (Neurath) boat and inspect the other parts' when doubting a moral attitude (Blackburn 1998: 318). Quasi-realism does place us *firmly* on Neurath's boat. But, I've argued, it is mistaken to think that we need not explain how it is epistemically possible that we could be doing something wrong by *being on the boat at all*. That, I've argued, the quasi-realist cannot do.

This failure generalises to other non-cognitivist theories, such as sentimentalism or pragmatism. For example, take a pragmatism on which moral practice is best understood as an attempt to create and adopt norms to aid in meeting some practical goal(s), such as solving problems of interpersonal interactions.¹⁶⁸ Such a theory cannot appeal to anything about the practice of morality itself which, if mistaken, would entail wholesale moral error.

At best, the pragmatist could maintain that sincere engagement in moral discourse will frustrate the practical goals of moral practice. But to think this allows them to capture the epistemic possibility with which we are concerned conflates two distinct forms of wholesale error:

(Veritistic): Error such that all claims within a domain are false or subject to some false presupposition.

(Non-Veritistic): Error such that sincere engagement in some domain of discourse or practice will lead to failing to achieve some practical goal(s) or aim(s) of that discourse or practice.

¹⁶⁸ Max Khan Hayward (ms) advances a version of this view.

Our pragmatist, and other non-cognitivists who insist the only goals or aims of moral practice are practical ones, *can* explain how engaging in moral practice could meet (Non-Veritistic). Perhaps, for example, moral practice will frustrate fruitful coordination of human action, a claim cognitivists and non-cognitivists alike could accept. But I have suggested there is another sense of wholesale error epistemically possible regarding morality: (Veritistic). And if morality is claimed to be concerned only with the creation and adoption of various norms to help achieve some practical goals, then these forms of non-cognitivism *cannot* allow for and explain veritistic wholesale moral error.¹⁶⁹

§5. Naturalism and Wholesale Moral Error

Moral naturalism also fails to allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

To begin to see why, take a simple form of moral naturalism. Suppose moral rightness is identical to the natural property of happiness maximisation. If so, then it is epistemically impossible for there to be wholesale moral error. Since whilst some moral judgements about which actions maximise happiness may be false, the view lacks any explanation as to how and why *all* moral judgements could be subject to a kind of error that would make them all false – or subject to a false presupposition – because we know that *at least some* judgements concerning which acts maximise happiness are true.

Now consider, for example, Peter Railton's (1986) moral naturalism. Railton tries to capture the purported features of morality by appeal to what is non-morally good for an agent, where what is non-morally good for an agent is understood as what an agent's fully informed

¹⁶⁹ Henceforth, 'wholesale moral error' refers to (Veritistic).

counterpart would want us to want. This captures a kind of objectivity, Railton argues, because what a fully informed counterpart would want us to want is non-morally good due to objective features of one's circumstances and constitution.

Railton's theory, if true, entails that it is epistemically impossible that there is wholesale moral error. To not entail that, it would have to be epistemically possible for there to be nothing that is non-morally good for an agent (to explain why all moral claims are false or subject to a false presupposition). But this is implausible: whilst there may be cases where nothing is non-morally good for an agent, we know that *at least some* things will be non-morally good for agents in some circumstances.

But does naturalism not entail that morality has certain presuppositions, which, if false, would entail wholesale moral error? Namely that if certain natural phenomena did not exist, then there would be wholesale moral error. And would this not explain how, on naturalism, the moral error theory *could* be true?

Naturalist theories can allow that there are some presuppositions of moral practice which, if not met, would in principle entail that all moral claims are false (or subject to a false presupposition). But the problem for naturalists is that the way they argue these constraints *are* met in fact entails, if true, that it is epistemically impossible that they are not met, and so epistemically impossible that there is wholesale moral error if naturalism is true.

Identifying moral rightness with natural facts about happiness maximisation would make it epistemically impossible that there is wholesale moral error, since it is epistemically impossible that *no* judgements about happiness maximisation are true. And if true, Railton's theory must allow for the epistemic possibility of no choice an agent's counterpart can make being non-

morally good for an agent. And we know this is false: at least some facts about one's constitution and circumstance will make at least some choices good for an agent. So, in trying to explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error by appeal to what we already know to be epistemically impossible, this response fails.¹⁷⁰

Railton may object: why think that some facts about one's constitution and circumstances will *always* make at least some choices good for an agent? Is an agent with a certain constitution and circumstance such that none of their available options is either good or bad for them not epistemically possible?

Suppose that such an agent was epistemically possible.¹⁷¹ This would mean that it is epistemically possible that nothing can be good or bad for that agent. For *them*, then, nothing is morally good or bad. But this falls short of *wholesale* moral error. For that, Railton's naturalist needs to show that *all* agents epistemically could be such that their constitution and circumstances makes *nothing* either good or bad for them, as that is what would be required for *no* moral claim to be true (and not just true or false as entertained by some agent).

But *that* is epistemically impossible. We know that agents in our world are such that some things are (non-morally) good or bad for them. Railton can allow for and explain how all moral claims could be false only if he can show that it is epistemically possible that *all* agents are so constituted or circumstanced such that they have no needs. That latter claim, however, is false.

¹⁷⁰ Response-dependence theories also face this problem. For they must appeal to actual or hypothetical, ideally-informed agents failing to make *any* moral judgements to try to capture the epistemic possibility of veritistic wholesale moral error on the supposition their theory is true. But this is an epistemic impossibility; we already know that *at least some* actual agents make moral judgements and that *at least some* ideally-informed ones would too.

¹⁷¹ This is not obvious: we might think it part of what it is to be an agent that there are things which are (non-morally) good or bad for one. I'll assume this worry misguided.

So, Railton cannot capture the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error on the supposition that his naturalism is true.

This problem generalises to any form of moral naturalism.¹⁷² In principle, naturalists can suggest that the (simple or complex) natural phenomena they take the moral to be identical with, reducible to, or fully grounded in may not exist so that moral claims are false. But as *realists* they maintain that such phenomena *do* exist, and some moral claims *are* true. Their identification/reduction of the moral to the natural is made partly to fend off the error theorist. If true, however, their theory lacks any explanation of how moral practice could be subject to wholesale moral error, since, as we've seen, realist candidates for such identification/reduction are ones that (and we know do) exist.

And they must be. For if the moral naturalist identified or reduced the moral to some natural phenomena that do not exist, then the moral naturalist would be an error theorist in disguise. But moral naturalists are not error theorists, and to respond to my argument they need to accommodate the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error without collapsing into an error theory. I have argued they cannot do so.

It is instructive to recall how non-naturalism avoids this problem. For the non-existence of the non-natural is epistemically possible since, for all we know, they may not exist (or: given our evidence the probability of non-natural phenomena not existing is above zero). So even if true, alleged non-naturalist presuppositions of morality epistemically could be false, since the non-existence of non-natural moral phenomena is epistemically possible. The naturalist, by

¹⁷² See, e.g., Thomson (1996; 2001); Jackson (1998); Boyd (1988).

contrast, appeals to natural phenomena the non-existence of which, as we've seen, is an epistemic impossibility.¹⁷³

§6. Non-Realist Cognitivism, Irrealist Cognitivism, Relaxed Realism, and Wholesale Moral Error

So far, I've assumed that moral error theories concern either some mistaken metaphysical presupposition of moral discourse or, as quasi-realism might entertain, some moral consideration that undermines all our moral attitudes.

Non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, and relaxed realism appeal to unorthodox meta-metaphysical claims to defend irreducibly normative propositions without incurring the ontological commitments of 'robust' non-naturalism. This interestingly forces revisions of how to understand what a moral (or normative) error theory *could be*. Still, they fail to allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

§6.1. Non-Realist Cognitivism

Non-realist cognitivism is best understood as adopting truthmaker theory and denying truthmaker maximalism: some truths, including (pure) normative truths, do not require truthmakers. This allows for at least two forms of error theory.

The first: that claims of kind K require truthmakers, that there are no truthmakers for K claims, and so K-claims are uniformly false (or subject to some false presupposition). This is one natural understanding of, for example, Mackie's error theory: moral truths require non-natural truthmakers, there are none, so there are no moral truths.

¹⁷³ And this is part of the naturalist anti-error-theory strategy: deny that moral truth depends upon the existence of irreducibly moral phenomena and offer extant natural phenomena in their place.

The second: whilst claims of kind K do not require truthmakers, they are uniformly false. That is, K-claims may all be false even if their truth does not depend upon any truthmakers. Supposing, with non-realist cognitivism, that true (pure) normative propositions do not require truthmakers, the thought is that, somehow, it remains epistemically possible that all normative propositions are false (or subject to some false presupposition other than the assumption they require but lack truthmakers).

Whether non-realist cognitivism can allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error requires understanding the error theory to take the second form. If the non-realist cognitivist suggested that all error theories take the first form, then they concede they cannot explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. For they deny that moral truths require truthmakers whilst granting that the epistemic possibility of the moral error theory requires that moral truths require truthmakers. This constitutes denial of our target epistemic possibility.

The question, then, is whether non-realist cognitivism can provide a plausible explanation for how, for all we know, despite not requiring truthmakers, purely normative propositions may all be false (or, given our evidence, that such propositions may all be false despite not requiring truthmakers).

They cannot. First, by denying the need for normative truthmakers, they block the explanation available to traditional non-naturalists: suggesting morality requires non-natural (substantive) facts as moral truthmakers and that the lack of such truthmakers is an epistemic possibility. Second, the view does not recognise any metaphysical or ontological presuppositions of moral claims that it could appeal to the epistemic possibility of the falsity of consistently with

non-realist cognitivism. Third, non-realist cognitivism does not entail, if true, some counterfactual that would help explain how the error theory remains epistemically possible. As noted in Chapter 1, the theory does not take the truth of normative propositions to depend upon *anything* other than, trivially, the truth of other normative propositions (which themselves lack truthmakers). So, the only counterfactual claim that the non-realist cognitivist can appeal to is: if all (pure) normative propositions were false, then there would be wholesale moral error. This is trivial and offers no explanation for *how* all such propositions could be false.

This appears to leave the non-realist cognitivist with having to try to provide an explanation of how, assuming their view, wholesale moral error remains epistemically possible on first-order moral grounds. I return to this option in §6.4.

§6.2. Irrealist Cognitivism

Irrealist cognitivism maintains that there are existent (“real”) and non-existent (“irreal”) objects. The former are entities with causal standing and the latter are either mind-dependent or mind-independent entities to which we can refer and have properties but lack existence. Amongst the latter, we find objective, mind-independent irreal reason relations. Skorupski explicitly claims that we do have normative (including moral) knowledge and develops his irrealist cognitivism partly to explain how this knowledge is possible. This means he assumes that the moral error theory is false.

Still, Skorupski does tell us *how* he understands moral and more broadly normative error theories and *why* he rejects them:

Reason relations are not *putatively real objects* that turn out not to exist. That view would make sense if we thought of them as putative attributes. There would then be a

significant question about whether there actually are any such attributes, or indeed could be. But we do not think this. [...] All truths about fictional objects and putative reals are truths about minds; but not all truths about reason relations are. In particular, *norms* are truths about reason relations that are not truths about anything else. In this sense we can say that reason relations are neither fictions nor putative reals, but objective (non-mind-dependent), actual irrealis. (Skorupski 2010: 429)

Skorupski understands an error theory about claims of kind K to maintain that K-talk concerns some putatively real object(s) that turn out not to exist. Consider wholesale error about witches: witch-discourse assumed that witches exist – have causal standing, on irrealist cognitivism – but since they do not, witch-discourse is subject to wholesale error. Thus, if the moral error theory was true, then it would have to be that, for example, moral properties are putatively real objects posited, say, by moral discourse which turn out to not exist.

On Skorupski's view, this means that a moral error theory is plausible only if moral discourse assumes that, for example, reason relations have causal standing. Since reason relations, he claims, have no such standing, they do not exist. But moral claims are not all false since moral discourse, Skorupski thinks, *does not* assume that reason relations have causal standing. Our moral and other normative knowledge only assumes that there are irreal reason relations.

This leaves irrealist cognitivism unable to provide an explanation for the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. If it were epistemically possible, assuming irrealist cognitivism, then it would have to be consistent with what we know that reason relations are putatively real objects posited by moral discourse that do not exist. But irrealist cognitivism maintains that we know that moral discourse does not assume reason relations are real entities

with causal standing. *Qua* irrealist cognitivist, then, they leave our target epistemic possibility unexplained.

In fact, irrealist cognitivism goes further: it suggests that the very question of whether *there exist* any reason relations is itself confused. For it presupposes that reason relations are the kinds of entities for which there would be a ‘significant question about whether there actually are any such’ relations. (Skorupski 2010: 429). But that assumption, assuming irrealist cognitivism, is a mistake: reason relations are not the types of objects for which it is intelligible to ask whether they exist since they are (supposedly) not objects we presume do or could have causal standing (propositions about them, Skorupski claims, are not *factual* at all but purely normative).

But there is another way to formulate an error theory even if reason relations are supposedly non-existent. This is to claim that reason relations are not in the domain of quantification in our (or any) world. Thus, there neither exist reason relations (entities with causal standing) nor are there irreal reason relations (non-existent relations to which we can refer and which have properties). Perhaps the irrealist cognitivist can suggest, then, that it is consistent with all we know that the domain of quantification (in this or all worlds) does not contain reason relations. If so, then it remains epistemically possible that there is wholesale moral error. For then we would be failing to refer to any reason relations at all in moral and other normative discourse. *Prima facie*, an error theory follows.

The problem is that, as we saw in Chapter 3, the irrealist cognitivist’s master argument *assumes* that we have knowledge of reason relations. Skorupski’s argument for the irrealism of reason relations assumes such knowledge, that we do not have such knowledge in the way that we gain knowledge of what exists, and so given his other assumptions the subjects of our normative knowledge must be irreal reason relations.

If the irrealist cognitivist relinquished their assumption of normative knowledge to offer the above explanation of the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error, they would undermine the argument for their view. This means that not only is this explanation not available to Skorupski's irrealist cognitivist, given the assumption they make of normative knowledge, but surrendering that assumption would undermine Skorupski's argument for the view.¹⁷⁴

Moreover, notice that given what the irrealist cognitivist thinks irreal reason relations are – norms of cognition about what to do, think, or feel – then any justification they can offer to think irreal reason relations are not in the domain of quantification look like reasons to reject their claim. For any such reason will make, perhaps implicit, appeal to a norm of reasoning. If so, then the reason they give to think it is epistemically possible that there are no irreal reason relations is a reason to believe that the absence of norms of cognition is epistemically impossible.

Might there be some way of suggesting that it remains an epistemic possibility that there is wholesale moral error because, even if there are irreal reason relations, the norms of cognition they supposedly concern epistemically may be inconsistent? We'll return to this in §6.4.

§6.3. Relaxed Realism

Relaxed realism posits distinct domains or subject matters. Within each domain, there are different ways that entities exist. Relatedly, there are standards of reasoning that differ across

¹⁷⁴ Whether Meinongian meta-ethical theories can avoid relying upon Skorupski's master argument is an interesting question for future work. If so, then the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error may be explained by suggesting that, for all we know, reason relations are not in the domain of quantification in our (or any) world. The worry, of course, is that if argument for the presence of reason relations in the domain of quantification ends up appealing to *agents*, then such Meinongian theories that aim for mind-independent and objective reason relations may face additional difficulty or collapse, as Sylvan (2016) suggests, into constructivism.

subject matters, where these domain-specific standards settle (metaphysically and epistemologically) ontological disputes within those domains.

Assuming Scanlon's meta-metaphysics, a domain could be subject to wholesale error in one of two ways. First, a domain might have certain claims that characterise that subject matter conflict with the natural domain. This seems so of witch- and ghost-talk: a ghost, for example, is supposed to have causal effects in the natural world that conflict with claims entailed true by the standards of the natural domain (such as regarding what is physically possible).

Second, if a domain does not involve any presuppositions that can conflict with the natural domain, then an error theory holds for claims within that domain only if that domain is internally inconsistent. Since Scanlon denies that the normative domain involves making any claims inconsistent with those in the natural domain, the only option left to explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error is to maintain that it is epistemically possible the moral domain – as a sub-set of the normative domain – is internally inconsistent in such a way that all moral claims are false.

Scanlon recognises a question over how the moral domain 'fit[s] into the wider' normative domain. He allows that one might 'be entirely competent in deciding questions about the moral rightness and wrongness of actions on the basis of right-making and wrong-making considerations, but nonetheless believe that we have no reason to treat conclusions arrived at in this way as action guiding' (Scanlon 2017: 880). This person, Scanlon thinks, maintains that 'there really is no such thing as morality, normally understood' (Scanlon 2017: 880). Crucially, though, this does not explain how it could be that all claims about moral rightness and wrongness are *false*. It only explains that the epistemic possibility that moral claims are not action

guiding is consistent, on his view, with thinking that there are some true moral claims about rightness and wrongness.

As I'll now argue, the best argument for thinking that some first-order contradiction in moral discourse may entail the error theory is unavailable to relaxed realism. As such, relaxed realists are unable to explain *how* and *why* it is epistemically possible that the moral domain involves some internal contradiction in a way that would entail an error theory.

§6.4. Appeal to a First-Order Argument?

If there is a first-order moral argument for the moral error theory, then either of these three views may be able to utilise the epistemic possibility of its success to maintain that the truth of their views is consistent with the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error. For whilst each theory denies that there is some metaphysical or ontological assumption in moral practice the falsity of which would entail the error theory, they allow that in principle something internal to moral practice itself could undermine the truth of all moral claims.¹⁷⁵

This might sound immediately implausible. There is, however, interesting historical precedent for thinking such an argument is at least intelligible. Henry Sidgwick, in the Concluding Chapter of the first edition of *The Method of Ethics*, voiced concern that his view that rational egoism and classical utilitarianism are equally plausible entailed,

¹⁷⁵ Quasi-realism does too; could quasi-realists not appeal to the coming argument? First, as we'll see, the argument depends upon taking the relevant moral truths that generate a contradiction to be conceptual truths. It is unclear whether quasi-realists can endorse this. Second and more importantly, we must read such arguments as quasi-realists. Given the account of moral error as attitudes towards *x* that can be improved, this means that *whatever* the first-order grounds for error theory the quasi-realist entertains are, they are committed to thinking that those considerations can improve *all* moral attitudes – racists and non-racists alike. And that, I've argued, is an epistemic impossibility: we know that the moral attitude of the non-racist cannot be *morally* improved.

[A] contradiction so fundamental that if it cannot be overcome the whole system must fall to the ground... (Sidgwick 1981: 472)

The worry: assuming the irreconcilable inconsistency of rational egoism and classical utilitarianism, this suggests that the whole system of 'practical reason' – and morality along with it – may descend 'to Chaos' or, in other words, veritistic wholesale error (Sidgwick 1981: 472–473).

Christopher Cowie (2020) has offered a first-order argument for the moral error theory. Such arguments are difficult to make. To see why, note that they try to conclude that morality is subject to wholesale moral error because of an apparent inconsistency between some moral claims.

To move from such an apparent inconsistency to an error theory, however, is difficult. First, the apparent inconsistency must be plausibly argued as *actually* so. Second, this inconsistency must not simply entail that one of the claims that entail it are mistaken. Rather, the inconsistency must entail that *all* moral claims are false. Third, the inconsistency must not just reveal some lack of moral *knowledge* but target the *truth* of moral claims. Finally, the inconsistency must be an inconsistent commitment we somehow *cannot avoid* and not some contingent, avoidable feature of our actual moral practice.

In the wake of Kenneth Arrow's (1950) formal proof of an inconsistency in some intuitive principles of social choice, population axiologists – building upon Parfit (1984) – have

wondered whether a similar demonstration of the inconsistency of some very plausible axiological claims can be made in ethics.¹⁷⁶

According to Gustaf Arrhenius (2000; 2004; 2011; Forthcoming), it can. Arrhenius argues that there are six ‘axiological impossibility theorems’. Their details take us too far afield here. The important point is this: if Arrhenius is right, then there are claims in population axiology that look extremely plausible but are mutually inconsistent.

Cowie grants Arrhenius’s results and plugs them into his ‘master argument’,

- (1) ‘If the propositions that constitute the impossibility proof aren’t all true, then no moral propositions are true.
- (2) They aren’t all true (they’re inconsistent).
- (3) No moral propositions are true. (1, 2)
- (4) When we make moral judgements, we’re trying to state true moral propositions.
- (5) When we make moral judgements, we’re thereby in error (3,4)’ (Cowie 2020: 6)

The challenge, Cowie recognises, is to justify (1): ‘Why would the falsity of one of the propositions in the axiological impossibility theorem entail the falsity of all moral – or at least axiological – propositions?’ (Cowie 2020: 6)

Cowie first considers justifying (1) by claiming the axiological claims in question have a kind of *epistemic security*: ‘they’re the kinds of propositions that we’re warranted in having as high a credence in as we are in *anything* (within the domain)’ (Cowie 2020: 6). ‘1+1=2’ is plausibly a

¹⁷⁶ For discussion of the profound impact of Arrow’s work in economics, see Sen & Maskin (2014).

claim of this kind, where if we do not know it then, plausibly, we have no mathematical knowledge. Similarly, perhaps some axiological claims, like ‘If population A is a perfectly equal population of the same size as population B, and every person in A has higher welfare than every person in B, then A is better than B, other things being equal’ have such epistemic security. But as Cowie concedes, at best this shows how the falsity of one of the inconsistent axiological propositions he discusses threatens to show that we lack knowledge of any moral propositions. But error theory requires that there are no moral *truths*.

He next considers an appeal to *explanatory basicness*. The suggestion: moral justification is such that there are certain ‘assumptions that would explain why, if at all, other less basic propositions in the domain are true’ (Cowie 2020: 8). But suppose some moral claims that we think explanatorily basic are inconsistent. As Cowie points out, ‘Surely, without some reason to think otherwise, the best we [can conclude is] that ordinary moral thought turns out to be mistaken in its explanatory commitments [...] the appropriate conclusion would be a thorough-going revisionism of ordinary first-order moral judgment, not an error theory.’ (Cowie 2020: 8)

This leaves Cowie’s preferred option,

The seeming undeniability of the propositions that constitute the impossibility theorem suggests that they are a kind of ‘conceptual truth’; that their truth is explained or grounded by the essence of the concept of goodness. Now if the essence of a concept grounds a contradiction, then anyone who makes a judgment with that concept has failed to say something true (compare someone who makes judgments with the concept of a round square). (Cowie 2020: 9)

The thought: perhaps Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau's 'moral fixed point' view, according to which 'there is a battery of substantive moral truths [...] that are also conceptual truths', is true (Cuneo & Shafer-Landau 2014: 400). If so, then the reason why inconsistency amongst some conceptual moral truths would entail an error theory is that the inconsistency shows us that our moral concepts involve contradictions, and we cannot employ such concepts to make true moral claims. If the axiological claims generating our contradiction are conceptual truths, then the moral error theory seems to follow.¹⁷⁷

Even if Cowie's argument is plausible, none of the three views discussed in this subsection can appeal to the epistemic possibility of its soundness to explain wholesale moral error. Non-realist cognitivism denies that pure moral and other normative propositions are conceptual truths to block certain reductive meta-ethical projects. So, appeal to the epistemic possibility of the soundness of Cowie's argument is blocked for non-realist cognitivism.

The irrealist cognitivist cannot appeal to this argument either. On Skorupski's view, conceptual truths are 'epistemic-normative truth[s]: an epistemic norm that partly constitutes a concept' (Skorupski 2010: 453). So conceptual truths on his view are normative truths about epistemic reason relations, like whether we have reason to apply some concept in some situation. This might seem to warrant claiming that it is epistemically possible that *all* propositions about epistemic reason relations concerning, say, *good* are false because they either alone, or in conjunction with some other basic norms, are inconsistent.

But Irrealist Cognitivism cannot make this claim. For if there are some inconsistent conceptual truths about moral concepts – inconsistent claims about epistemic reason relations

¹⁷⁷ Cowie's labelling of this argument as 'first-order', then, is slightly misleading. It is the conjunction of an (apparent) first-order contradiction *and* a meta-ethical view about the nature of some moral truths.

regarding our moral concepts – then these claims must be false. If they are false, however, then we cannot have knowledge of them (since knowledge is factive). But Skorupski cannot grant the epistemic possibility of the norms of cognition regarding moral concepts all being false since he both *assumes* that we have moral and other normative knowledge *and* appeals to such knowledge to *argue for* irrealist cognitivism. In denying the epistemic possibility of such inconsistent claims, irrealist cognitivism cannot avail of the epistemic possibility of the soundness of Cowie’s argument to explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error.

Relaxed realism might seem able to suggest that it is an epistemic possibility that the concepts employed in moral discourse are contradictory. As Scanlon says,

It need not be apparent at the outset whether the concepts purporting to characterize a domain are in fact coherent. It could turn out that every attempt to work out the content of these concepts led to contradictions, in which we should conclude that we were mistaken to think that there was such a subject. (Scanlon 2017: 886)

If, for example, the concept of *goodness* leads to contradiction, Scanlon seems to allow that this would suggest that it was a mistake to think that there was such a subject as ethics. Of course, Scanlon denies that there are such conceptual contradictions in ethics. The problem, however, is that to appeal to Cowie’s argument Scanlon would have to endorse the claim that the relevant moral truths that lead to contradiction are *conceptual truths*.

And relaxed realism *denies* that pure normative propositions are conceptual truths. For recall Scanlon’s denial that the standards of reasoning that determine whether there are, say, moral reasons for action are set by ‘the “linguistic rules” for the use of the terms in question. People can use terms such as “number,” “set,” or “wrongness” without misuse of language while

disagreeing to some degree about the facts about such things, and about the best ways of determining these facts' (Scanlon 2014: 19, fn. 3). Here Scanlon is taking pure normative truths to not be linguistic truths determined by linguistic rules or frameworks analogously to, say, Carnap. Instead, each subject matter has its own substantive standards of reasoning (related to criteria for existence) that 'settle' the truths of that domain. Scanlon could agree that some axiological claims lead to contradiction. But this, at best, would suggest that we need to revise our axiological practice and not that such results leave morality subject to wholesale moral error.

§7. Conclusion

This completes the response to the final objection to (P3) considered in §3. That objection suggested that our target theories can allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error by claiming their theories (epistemically) could be false even if they are true. This assumed that these theories are consistent with the epistemic possibility of their own falsity. But since, if true, they entail that there is no wholesale moral error in a way that also entails that wholesale moral error is epistemically impossible or inexplicable, and since the epistemic possibility of the falsity of their theories (as non-error-theories) requires the possibility of wholesale moral error, none of these theories are consistent with the epistemic possibility of their own falsity.

So, they cannot explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error – *qua* naturalists, non-cognitivists, non-realist cognitivists, irrealist cognitivists, or relaxed realists – either by saying such a possibility remains and is explicable if their theories are true, or by supposing their theories epistemically could be false even if they take them to be true. (P3), then, is true. So, they are false.

Derek Parfit famously argued that if there are no non-natural moral truths, then nothing matters (Parfit 2011: 303–4, 367). And some prominent non-naturalists, such as David Enoch, take the non-naturalist's 'most respectable opponent' to be the moral error theorist (Enoch 2011: 121). Parfit's claim has been much discussed.¹⁷⁸ It is noteworthy that my argument provides independent reason to accept Parfit's claim and justifies Enoch's attitude.

For if neither non-cognitivism, moral naturalism, nor these 'relaxed' or 'quietist' views can allow for and explain the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error, then they are false. I have argued that they all fail to recognise that morality epistemically could be subject to veritistic wholesale error. Because such error is epistemically possible, and if only (robust) non-naturalism and the error theory can capture this, then if such non-naturalism is false nothing matters.¹⁷⁹

The question of whether it is an epistemic possibility that there is wholesale moral error is, I suspect, in Richard Rorty's words:

[...] one of those issues which puts everything up for grabs at once - where there is no point in trying to find agreement about 'the data' or about what would count as deciding the question. (Rorty 1982: xliii)

For those committed to the views argued against above will likely be unmoved by my argument. They might instead bite the bullet and accept that it is a consequence of their theories that veritistic wholesale moral error is epistemically impossible. This, they may think, is all the better for them and a nice argument against the error theory. To grant (P1), they may continue,

¹⁷⁸ For an excellent recent challenge to it, see Hayward (2019). My argument thus provides an indirect response to Hayward, and others like Bedke (2020), concerned about claims like Parfit's. For direct responses, see Enoch (2020) and Golub (2021).

¹⁷⁹ When Parfit defended this conditional, he meant that either naturalism or non-naturalism (of some form, including his non-realist cognitivism) was true and that if naturalism were true then nothing would matter.

would be to *already* assume a way of thinking about morality they deny, perhaps motivating a charge of question-begging against me.

But my argument can be accused of question-begging only in a weak sense that it includes a premise someone already committed to the truth of non-cognitivism or moral naturalism will deny. Most philosophical arguments unavoidably contain such a premise, and the important question becomes whether we find one of the views argued against above, or the claim that there is an epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error, more plausible. We face, then, a familiar Moorean standoff.

But as Rorty continues: ‘the messiness of the issue is not a reason for setting it aside’ (Rorty 1982: xliii).

I have provided reasons to think the denial of the epistemic possibility of wholesale veritistic moral error is implausible. But even if these will not convince the unrepentant, my argument can serve other crucial functions. First, it may convince those undecided over these theories to reject those that leave the error theory epistemically impossible. Second, it reveals a consequence of said theories that may convince those previously attracted to them but unaware of this consequence to reject them. Third, arguments that lead to Moorean, intuitional standoffs reveal some of the bedrock issues that divide us within philosophy. And sometimes these bedrock issues are *also* ones where everything is up for grabs at once.

This argument reveals that those who wish to defend a form moral or normative realism that avoids the ontological commitments of ‘robust’ realism do so whilst making the error theory epistemically impossible. Treating normative propositions as truthmaker-less truths, taking normative propositions to concern only nominal facts and unreal reason relations, or denying that

the truth of ontological claims about normativity depends upon anything other than the standards of reasoning in the normative domain, renders moral error theory epistemically impossible. Such theorists may think this no objection and an attractive response to such error theory. But to those who think that veritistic wholesale moral error is epistemically possible, this will be a cost too high to pay.¹⁸⁰

Finally, note that my argument reveals a fault line between meta-ethical theories: those that allow for the epistemic possibility of a moral error theory and those who do not. This is an interesting disagreement. Is this disagreement merely about moral knowledge? Or is it a disagreement over the nature of morality itself? If the latter, is it a disagreement that casts doubt upon whether each side shares enough common ground to be having a substantive debate about morality?

Of course, I recognise my argument does not decisively refute the views it targets. There is much more to be said. But it is an important form of philosophical progress to identify these doubly-troubling issues: intuitional standoffs concerning some bedrock issue where everything is also up for grabs at once. These raise novel, difficult questions. Their resolution will have to await another occasion.

¹⁸⁰ *Pace* Cowie (2020: 1–2), this illustrates how non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, and relaxed realism can reject his ‘first-order’ argument: denying the meta-ethical justification for its first premise that the axiological claims it concerns are conceptual truths.

Chapter 6

Grounding, Ethics, and (Much of) Moral Metaphysics

§1. Introduction

Some meta-ethicists hope to dismiss some or all standard moral metaphysical debate. Non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, and relaxed realism attempt this through controversial meta-metaphysical commitments. Other so-called ‘quietist’ meta-ethical realists, such as Matthew Kramer and Ronald Dworkin, and quasi-realists such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, also attempt this in different ways.

Take the minimalism of Blackburn (1998) about various notions moral metaphysical debate is often characterised in terms of. Minimalism about truth, for example, seems to collapse the distinction between an ethical claim like ‘*x* is morally wrong’ and the perhaps meta-ethically sounding claim “‘*x* is morally wrong’ is true’, making the latter just a rephrasing of the former. This strategy is substantially developed by Kramer (2009; 2017), who also challenges the commonly drawn ethics/meta-ethics divide. Kramer argues that this entails that metaphysical meta-ethical debates over whether moral claims are true just are ethical debates conducted at high levels of abstraction from particular moral cases.

Dworkin (1996; 2011), alternatively, argues that *all* meta-ethical claims are disguised first-order ethical claims. He does this by arguing for a neutrality constraint on meta-ethics: a theory or claim is meta-ethical only if it is irrelevant to the justification of ethical theories and claims. But, he continues, all meta-ethical claims fail this test. So, there are *no* meta-ethical claims or theories; all claims about morality are normative ethical claims in disguise.

These ways of dismissing standard moral metaphysical debate depend upon highly controversial theories of truth, fact-hood, *inter alia*, claims regarding the relationship between ethics and meta-ethics, or other meta-metaphysical commitments. A natural question they raise, then, is this: is there a way to dismiss some or all standard moral metaphysical debate, in the spirit of such views, that appeals to much less controversial assumptions – perhaps even assumptions their opponents likely hold? I argue that the recent prevalence of the notion of *grounding* suggests that the answer is *yes*.

For what is the debate between moral naturalism and non-naturalism about? And what is the explanatory notion being intimated by phrases such as ‘because’ and ‘in virtue of’ in normative ethics? These seemingly unrelated questions have both recently received influential answers that appeal to the notion of grounding. A related widely accepted view in metaphysics, and increasingly in meta-ethical debate, is that there is *only one* notion of grounding.

In this chapter, I argue that if these views are correct, then we should abandon much of moral metaphysics; meta-ethicists who wish to settle the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism should, perhaps surprisingly, become normative ethicists instead. For, I argue, they entail that the truth of certain ethical claims is both necessary and sufficient for naturalism or non-naturalism.

This is significant for three reasons. First, it reveals how some prominent views together have a surprising consequence that their defenders will likely want to resist. Second, it is highly revisionary of standard moral metaphysical debate, which assumes that the naturalism/non-naturalism debate is neither settled by nor depends upon what normative ethical claims are true. Third, as mentioned, it offers a justification for replacing much of moral metaphysical debate with normative ethical debate, in the spirit of quasi-realism and of so-called ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’

moral realism, but on substantially fewer and less controversial assumptions than those views appeal to.

§2. Grounding, Ethical Grounding, and Unity

There are myriad ways of distinguishing between moral naturalism and non-naturalism. An important and recently influential way is,

(Grounding) Naturalism maintains that there are moral facts and that every moral fact is fully metaphysically grounded in a natural fact (or plurality of facts). Non-naturalism accepts that there are moral facts but maintains that at least some are either not grounded in any fact (or facts) or not fully grounded in a natural fact (or facts).¹⁸¹

To explain: many facts obtain *because* or *in virtue of* others in a way that does not seem to indicate causal, semantic, or conceptual determination. The fact that Adam exists, for example, neither causes, means, nor conceptually entails the existence of the singleton set {Adam}. Instead, {Adam} exists *because* of the existence of Adam, or *in virtue of* his existence. Adam's existence, then, *metaphysically explains* the existence of {Adam}.¹⁸²

Interest in grounding as a form of non-conceptual and non-causal metaphysical explanation has exploded.¹⁸³ One reason why is that it promises to help make sense of debates

¹⁸¹ This allows that non-naturalists either think some moral facts are ungrounded, or that some grounded moral facts are grounded in a combination of natural and non-natural moral fact or facts (e.g., some physical facts and a moral principle). See Enoch (2019); Leary (2020); and Rosen (2015, 2017b). As Leary (Forthcoming: 10, fn. 6) notes, others seemingly attracted to (Grounding) include Schroeder (2007); Chang (2013); and Dunaway (2015).

¹⁸² I assume that grounding is a relation, though my claims can be rephrased in the alternative view that grounding is an operator. Whilst I talk as if grounding itself is an explanatory relation, my claims are strictly neutral on whether metaphysical explanations are instead backed by grounding. Finally, I assume that the relata of grounding are facts, where a fact can be grounded by one fact or a plurality of facts. Nothing I argue depends upon these assumptions.

¹⁸³ See Bliss & Trogden (2014) for an overview.

that involve claims made with phrases like ‘because’, ‘in virtue of’, and ‘making’, but where their use does not seem to invoke anything concerning causation, concepts, or linguistic meaning.

Consider, for example, the debate over what normative ethical theory is correct. Take a simple utilitarianism,

(Utilitarianism) Necessarily, an action x is morally right if and only if x maximises happiness.

It seems plausible that utilitarians *also* believe that an action is right *because* or *in virtue of* that action’s maximising happiness, or that some action’s maximising happiness is what *makes* it right. That is, utilitarians are not merely concerned with intensional equivalence (that is, co-extension across modal space) between moral rightness and happiness maximisation but, rather, with some kind of *explanatory* relationship between them,

(Utilitarianism*) Necessarily, an action x is morally right if and only if, *and because*, x maximises happiness.

This seems true, of course, of other ethical theories. For example, consider W.D. Ross’s claim, in defending his pluralistic deontological theory, that

(Promising) Necessarily, if an agent has made a promise to perform some act, then that agent has, in virtue of that promise, a *prima facie* obligation to perform that act.

Here, Ross is not just suggesting that acts of promising are necessarily co-extensive with *prima facie* obligations to perform promised actions. Rather, a promiser also has a *prima facie* obligation to perform those actions *in virtue of* or *because of* the fact that they have so promised.

It is extremely plausible that,

(Ethical Grounding) The explanatory notion pervasive throughout normative ethical enquiry is a form of grounding.

This suggestion takes talk of normative ethical theories offering accounts of ‘right-makers’, ‘wrong-makers’, and the ‘grounds’ of moral facts at face value, suggesting they concern what metaphysically explains the ethical status of (*inter alia*) actions.¹⁸⁴ But even if the explanatory notion throughout ethics is grounding, there is disagreement over,

(Unity) There is only one grounding relation.

(Disunity) There are at least two fundamentally distinct grounding relations.

The former – grounding monists – maintain there is only one grounding relation: *metaphysical* grounding. This would be a relation expressed by claims like {Adam} exists because Adam exists, I am in pain in virtue of C-fibres firing, or the glass is fragile in virtue of the arrangement of its constituent molecules. The latter – grounding pluralists – think there are at least two distinct grounding relations which cannot be inter-defined or defined in terms of any other relation. Kit Fine (2002), for example, recognises three: metaphysical, natural, and normative. Despite detractors, (Unity) has a strong claim to orthodoxy amongst friends of

¹⁸⁴ See Berker (2018: §3) for arguments against other ways of understanding this explanatory notion in terms of, *inter alia*, identity, reduction, and supervenience.

grounding in metaphysics and has received a recent powerful defence in meta-ethical debate from Selim Berker (2018).¹⁸⁵

Given their prominence, we might wonder what of significance follows from (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity). There has been surprisingly little direct discussion of this.¹⁸⁶ I now argue that their conjunction has an unexpected consequence: that much moral metaphysical debate should be abandoned.

§3. Abandoning (Much of) Moral Metaphysics?

(Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity), although not uncontroversial, are substantially less strong claims than those mentioned in the introduction to this chapter and are widely held. And, I argue, they *suffice* to show that the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism can be settled by ethical debate alone.

For suppose that (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) are true. The debate between naturalism and non-naturalism, then, is over whether moral facts are fully grounded in natural ones, and the explanatory notion normative ethical claims concern is metaphysical grounding.

¹⁸⁵ See, for example, Audi (2012); Rosen (2010); Schaffer (2009). Prominent pluralists include Bader (2017) and Enoch (2019). Berker takes (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity) to entail that ‘first-order moral philosophy [is in] the business of proposing (and assessing, and establishing) various grounding claims’ (Berker 2018: 743). Some normative ethicists are now explicitly assuming that ethical explanations concern metaphysical grounding: see Timmerman & Yishai (2020: 260–262).

¹⁸⁶ Exceptions: Bader (2017) argues that non-naturalism depends upon (Disunity). Leary (2020: 475) suggests that (Unity) is ‘significant’ because it has ‘implications’ for the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics; Berker (2018) agrees. Akhlaghi (2021b) argues that Berker and Leary are mistaken about that, but that (Unity) has other interesting consequences.

(Utilitarianism*) is thus the claim that moral facts about rightness are fully metaphysically grounded by facts about what maximises happiness. But since facts about what maximises happiness just are natural facts, (Utilitarianism*) would entail moral naturalism.

Alternatively, suppose a Rossian-style deontology was true. Ross (1930: 21) maintained that certain ethical facts – like (Promising) – lack further explanation. Given (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity), this becomes the claim that such facts are ungrounded.¹⁸⁷ If so, then non-naturalism would be true, since at least one ethical fact would now be ungrounded.

Since utilitarianism and Rossian deontology were arbitrary choices of normative ethical theories, (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) together entail that settling the correct normative ethical theory *suffices* to settle whether moral naturalism or non-naturalism is *true*.

Am I illicitly assuming that utilitarianism and Rossian deontology are representative of all normative ethical theories? After all, some, such as particularists, reject the demand for necessitated universal generalisations from ethical theories. Some ethicists reject *theories* altogether. None of that troubles my argument. For I am only assuming that normative ethicists are interested in defending claims that go beyond mere (necessary) extensional equivalence between some moral fact and some other facts. This is extremely plausible and is evidenced by frequent use throughout ethics of ‘because’, ‘in virtue of’, ‘makes’, and the like. I am only further assuming *arguendo* that the explanatory relation at issue amongst ethicists is metaphysical grounding.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ As Berker (2018: 742) notes, this is no anachronistic reading of Ross. Ross (1930) uses phrases like ‘makes’, ‘because’, ‘in virtue of’, ‘depends’, ‘ground’, and ‘due to’ throughout.

¹⁸⁸ Particularists, and those allergic to ethical theory, can thus read claims like ‘if a normative ethical theory on which *x* is true’ as ‘if the correct normative ethical claims are such that *x* is true’.

So: if a normative ethical theory according to which all moral facts are fully grounded in natural ones is true, then moral naturalism is true; if a normative ethical theory according to which at least some moral facts are ungrounded or not fully grounded in natural ones is true, then moral non-naturalism is true. By contraposition, if moral naturalism is false, then no normative ethical theory which treats all moral facts as fully grounded in natural ones is true (e.g., moral naturalism's falsity would entail the falsity of (Utilitarianism*)). If moral non-naturalism is false, then no ethical theory which treats some ethical facts as ungrounded or not fully grounded in natural facts is correct (e.g., non-naturalism's falsity would entail the falsity of Rossian deontology).

This is a very surprising result. We do not ordinarily think that normative ethical debate *alone* can determine the truth or falsity of moral naturalism or non-naturalism. Nor do we think that the truth or falsity of those views constrains what ethical theories could be true. But that is precisely what our three claims entail: if a normative ethical theory tells us that only natural facts fully ground moral facts, then naturalism is true; if some moral fact(s) lack full natural grounds or are ungrounded, then non-naturalism is true.

So (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) surprisingly entail,

(A) If a normative ethical theory on which all moral facts are fully grounded in natural facts is true, then moral naturalism is true.

(B) If a normative ethical theory on which some moral facts are ungrounded or not fully grounded in natural facts is true, then moral non-naturalism is true.

That is, that the truth of certain normative ethical theories is *sufficient* for settling the naturalism/non-naturalism debate. But do they also entail,

(C) Moral naturalism is true only if a normative ethical theory on which all moral facts are fully grounded in natural facts is true.

(D) Moral non-naturalism is true only if a normative ethical theory on which some moral facts are ungrounded or not fully grounded in natural facts is true.

That is, that the truth of certain types of normative ethical theory is *necessary* for naturalism or non-naturalism?

Yes. Take moral naturalism. (Grounding) entails that moral naturalism is the view that all ethical facts are fully grounded in natural facts. By (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity), debates over ethical theories concern the metaphysical grounding of ethical facts. So, if no normative ethical theory on which all moral facts are fully grounded in natural ones (e.g., (Utilitarianism*)) is true, then moral naturalism is false. By contraposition, that means that if moral naturalism is true, then a normative ethical theory on which all moral facts are fully grounded in natural facts is true. Thus, (C) follows from (Unity), (Ethical Grounding), and (Grounding). *Mutatis Mutandis* for (D) and non-naturalism.

(A)–(D) thus entail:

(E) Moral naturalism – the view that ethical facts are fully grounded in natural facts – is true *if and only if* the correct normative ethical theory is one on which all ethical facts are fully grounded in natural facts.

(F) Moral non-naturalism – the view that some ethical facts are ungrounded or not fully grounded in natural facts – is true *if and only if* the correct normative ethical theory is one on which some ethical facts are ungrounded or not fully grounded in natural facts.

By entailing (E) and (F), (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity), if true, surprisingly render the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism as one settled by whatever the correct normative ethical theory is. That is, they entail that the debate over the nature of moral facts can be answered by, and requires, paradigmatically ethical debate over what the grounds of ethical claims are.

Consider grounding explanations of why some glass is brittle. To discover what makes it the case that the glass has the property of being brittle, we must investigate the physics of the glass. Analogously, if ethical explanatory claims are metaphysical grounding claims, and the naturalist/non-naturalist divide just is a debate over the metaphysical grounding of ethical claims, then to investigate whether naturalism or non-naturalism is true we must engage in *ethical enquiry* to see what the grounds of, say, an action's rightness is.

This is an *even more* surprising result. (E) and (F) entail that moral naturalism or non-naturalism are entailed by, and depend upon, what the correct ethical theory tells us about the grounding of ethical facts. Thus, (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) suggest that meta-ethical debate over, for example, the relative ontological parsimony of naturalism or non-naturalism, the alleged metaphysical queerness of non-natural facts, the supervenience of the ethical on the non-ethical, and debate over whether naturalism captures the normativity of morality should be abandoned.

Rather, meta-ethicists concerned with the nature of ethical facts should become normative ethicists instead. For settling the correct ethical theory – that is, what does or does not fully ground various ethical facts – *suffices* to establish either naturalism or non-naturalism. Moreover, the truth of certain ethical grounding claims is *required* for the truth of naturalism (i.e., that all ethical facts are fully grounded in the natural) or non-naturalism (i.e., that some ethical grounding facts are either ungrounded or not fully grounded in the natural).

My point here is not the inconsequential one of relabelling moral metaphysical questions (such as supervenience and queerness) as ‘ethical’ and suggesting that changes something about them. They are metaphysical questions. I am arguing that (E) and (F) suggest that engagement in traditional moral metaphysical debate is not *necessary* to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, whilst debate over the correct ethical claims is both necessary *and* sufficient. And we settle ethical questions by the means appropriate for doing so (such as the method of cases, reflective equilibrium, *inter alia*). If we remain concerned about the traditional gamut of moral metaphysical questions, we would be failing to see what (E) and (F) entail. Since the correct ethical claims, established through ethical enquiry, will entail either naturalism or non-naturalism, answers to these additional metaphysical questions will follow from what the correct ethical claims are. Standard moral metaphysics to resolve this moral metaphysical dispute becomes unnecessary and, surprisingly, that all that is needed for resolving it *just is* ethical debate.¹⁸⁹

Some might think they can maintain neutrality on the naturalism/non-naturalism debate when defending an ethical theory. Consider a Rossian pluralist who tries to remain silent on whether the *prima facie* duties are themselves explained by (i.e., grounded in) some other principle(s). A refusal to answer questions about what explains (or not) some feature of one’s

¹⁸⁹ I am not suggesting that the naturalism/non-naturalism debate should be abandoned or is based upon a false presupposition. Rather, I am claiming, given our assumptions, that this meta-ethical debate is one that is settled by (and partly depends upon) normative ethical theorising about the grounds of ethical claims.

ethical theory, however, will not last long in ethical debate. Consider Brad Hooker's (1996) influential argument that his rule-consequentialist principle can explain the *prima facie* duties. Our Rossian must either objectionably ignore Hooker's argument and the challenge it raises, or respond and thus engage with asking what grounds the *prima facie* duties. But answering that latter question just is, given (E) and (F), to endorse naturalism or non-naturalism. Ethical theories, then, that do not answer whether the claims they defend are themselves grounded are importantly incomplete and will face further questions like Hooker's for Rossian pluralism.

My argument does not establish that there are *no* meta-ethical questions relevant to ethical enquiry which, in turn, would be relevant to settling the naturalism/non-naturalism debate. Questions of moral epistemology, for example, remain crucial; (E) and (F) do not entail that there are no epistemological questions relevant to how we know ethical grounding facts. This is no objection to my argument. My argument concerns showing that (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) entail that the answers to ethical debates suffices to settle the naturalism non-naturalism debate, and that we do not need to engage in the myriad metaphysical debates above that predominate enquiry concerning the naturalism/non-naturalism debate to settle it.

§4. Objections

§4.1. Whither Moral Metaphysics?

My aim has been to show that three plausible and widely accepted views together entail that the naturalism/non-naturalism debate is settled by, and requires the settling of, normative ethical debate. This surprising consequence is a highly revisionary understanding of what is necessary and sufficient for resolving the moral metaphysical debate over naturalism and non-naturalism. It suggests, I claim, that concerned meta-ethicists should become normative ethicists instead.

At this last point one may demur. Suppose standard moral metaphysical debate is not *necessary* to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate. This does not show, unlike what some quasi-realists or ‘quietist’ realists claim, that such metaphysical debate is *confused*. My argument perhaps merely shows that such debate could help determine which of naturalism or non-naturalism is true *alongside*, surprisingly, ethical enquiry. Moreover, (E) and (F) entail that if moral naturalism or non-naturalism were true, then their truth would delineate a non-empty set of candidate ethical theories (their truth would entail that the only live options will be either theories that ground all ethical facts in natural ones, or those that leave some ungrounded or at least partly grounded in non-natural facts). That is, I’ve shown that the resolution of the naturalism/non-naturalism debate through investigation of ethical supervenience, parsimony arguments, and the like also *helps settle ethical debates* by eliminating groups of ethical theories.

True: for all I’ve said, standard moral metaphysical debate is not based on any false assumptions nor that those who engage in it are deeply confused. Nevertheless, (E) and (F) do suggest meta-ethicists should abandon the standard moral metaphysical debates over naturalism and non-naturalism and focus our limited epistemic resources on ethical debates instead.

This is for three reasons. First, the epistemology and methodology of both metaphysics and ethics are contentious. Engagement in either requires incurring *hostages to methodological fortune*, where our enquiry may ultimately be based upon false assumptions. *Ceteris paribus*, we should incur as few hostages to methodological fortune as possible to resolve a dispute. Given that standard moral metaphysical debate is not necessary to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, and that normative ethical debate is both necessary *and sufficient*, we should avoid incurring unnecessary hostages to methodological fortune by engaging in standard moral metaphysical debates. Instead, we should incur only those necessary to settle the

naturalism/non-naturalism debate: whatever methodological assumptions we must make to conduct ethical enquiry.

Second, if we pursued both ethical enquiry and standard moral metaphysical enquiry to settle whether naturalism or non-naturalism is true, we are forced to confront two *very* difficult methodological problems. First, how should we combine ethical and metaphysical considerations when coming to a judgement about which of naturalism or non-naturalism to accept? Second, how should we weigh considered ethical judgements and metaphysical beliefs in cases where they conflict? The second of these problems, notably, threatens to generate *impassable* conflicts where debate devolves into clashes of intuitions.¹⁹⁰ Given (E) and (F), however, we can avoid this problem entirely by focusing solely upon settling what ethical theory to accept.¹⁹¹

Third, we have limited epistemic resources in moral philosophy. *Ceteris paribus*, we should employ epistemic resources as efficiently as possible: to maximise our chances of answering the most questions for the least epistemic work. Given (E) and (F), notice this asymmetry: the correct ethical claims *suffice* to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, whilst naturalism or non-naturalism would not suffice to settle *which ethical claims are true* (at most, they delineate some set of candidate ethical theories, but not which theory is true). So, employing our limited epistemic resources by exclusively working to resolve ethical debate is more efficient: doing so

¹⁹⁰ See McPherson (2009) for relevant discussion on Moorean meta-ethical arguments.

¹⁹¹ It may seem odd to suggest using as few methods as possible to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate. For in the natural sciences multiple methods are often used to try to render one's findings more robust. This analogy, however, is misleading. In the natural sciences, there is broad commitment to employing empirical methods of enquiry and some working model for how to combine one's different findings into an overall, robust view. But metaphysical enquiry and ethical enquiry, first, *prima facie* utilise distinct methods that do not obviously share the same background methodological commitments in the way that different empirical, natural scientific methods do. Second, we have no clear working model for how to combine, or deal with conflicts between, ethical and metaphysical considerations. So, we have no reason to believe that utilising these multiple lines of enquiry will make our answer to the naturalism/non-naturalism debate more robust, as opposed to force upon us unnecessary and seemingly intractable methodological problems which we can avoid by focussing on ethical debate alone.

would not only reveal the correct ethical theory but, in doing so, settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate too.

So, (E) and (F) not only reveal that standard moral metaphysical debate is unnecessary to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate and that ethical debate is both necessary and sufficient for doing so. They also suggest that concerned meta-ethicists should become normative ethicists instead. For doing so is the most efficient utilisation of our limited epistemic resources: determining what ethical theory to accept would also resolve the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, whilst avoiding incurring unnecessary hostages to methodological fortune and generating difficult and unnecessary methodological problems.

But perhaps all else is not equal and we have good reason not to engage solely in ethics. One might accuse me of undue optimism about the prospects of decisively settling ethical debates. Surely whether it is worth investing our epistemic resources *solely* into ethical debates depends partly on our chances of decisively resolving them. And this seems hardly likely!

But why be *particularly* sceptical about resolving whether (Utilitarianism*) is true as opposed to, say, whether intensionalism about properties is true such that ethical supervenience entails naturalism? *Prima facie*, reasons to be sceptical about the resolution of either look symmetrical, such as doubts over their appropriate methodology or how to understand the discourse they concern. One might insist that we should be more sceptical about resolving ethical debates than those in metaphysics. But why should we accept this? Entrenched disagreement, for example, persists in both fields. Absent such considerations, we ought to efficiently employ our limited epistemic resources solely in ethical enquiry, aiming to resolve these ethical debates *and* the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, whilst incurring only those hostages to methodological fortune that are strictly necessary to resolve them.

§4.2. From the Nature of Grounding to Naturalism or Non-Naturalism?

Another objection: perhaps we have good reason to incur additional hostage to methodological fortune, and expend epistemic labour on relevant metaphysical debates, because they may generate some consideration *so persuasive* in the naturalism/non-naturalism debate that it proved epistemically worthwhile. This is, of course, an epistemic possibility. It is difficult, though, to see what reason there is to assume this is *likely*. Moreover, we would need to determine how to weigh such metaphysical considerations with or against our best explanatory ethical claims. Such a challenge is significant and one which is unnecessary to settle the naturalism/non-naturalism debate.

Still, the epistemic possibility remains. So, suppose (E) and (F) are true. Here is a suggestion: could we not appeal to general considerations about the nature of grounding to cast doubt upon, say, all ethical facts being fully grounded in natural facts? If so, then this general metaphysical debate may provide powerful reasons to accept naturalism or non-naturalism.

But even if metaphysical reflection on the nature of moral facts could in principle undermine normative ethical theories – and so have some consequences for the naturalism/non-naturalism debate now understood – the plausibility of any undermining attempt will depend upon the actual grounding proposal being made. For without attention to the plausibility of the grounding proposal – for example, (Utilitarianism*) – there is no obvious reason to dismiss *all* attempts at providing full grounding of moral facts by natural ones without having encountered the ethical reasoning that allegedly motivates such a suggestion.¹⁹²

¹⁹² The non-naturalistically inclined may, like Fine (2002: 270), suspect that for any full grounding proposal for, say, the fact that some *x* is good, we will respond that we have the intuition that goodness ‘consists in something more’ than the proposed natural grounding fact. But if (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) are true, whether they do consist in more requires ethical reflection and asking, for example, whether (Utilitarianism*) is true.

This response might seem too quick. Consider the normative relevance argument:

(P1) Suppose a moral fact M is explained by a set of non-moral, natural facts F.

(P2) The explanation of M by F assumes that F has normative relevance, since it is only if and because F is normatively relevant that it can explain M.

(P3) The fact that F is normatively relevant is itself a normative fact, and it does not seem to be able to explain itself.

(P4) So, the explanation of M by F is incomplete; to complete it requires some further normative – here, moral – fact.

(C) Since M and F are arbitrarily chosen facts, there can be no complete explanation of a moral fact that doesn't involve some further moral fact. (Väyrynen 2013: 158–159)

Assuming (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity), this argument seems to show that moral naturalism is false – by entailing that any theory that offers only natural facts as the full grounding facts for ethical ones is false – without engaging in any recognisably ethical theorising. If so, then perhaps at least metaphysical debate over the nature of normative explanation remains a metaphysical, meta-ethical task that can help settle whether naturalism or non-naturalism is true.

There are two readings of (P1). To see it, distinguish between the *act* of explanation and the *product* of explanation. The act of explanation is what occurs when attempting to explain to some concerned agent why M obtains. The product of an explanation of why M obtains will be a

successful account of what is sufficient for M's obtaining – what one *produces* when they engage in the act of explanation.¹⁹³

A successful explanation in the product-sense need not be subject to the *epistemic constraints* that a successful explanation of why M obtains in the act-sense is. Consider explanations of why water boils. A successful explanation in the product-sense simply provides the correct account of why water boils. But a successful act of explanation seems to require that certain epistemic constraints are met, such as being informative or understanding-conducive on the part of one's hearer. For example, a successful product-explanation of why water boils might be produced during an unsuccessful act of explanation, since one's hearer may not understand enough chemistry and physics to understand the product-explanation.

Analogously, one reading of (P1) is the claim that M is fully explained in the product sense by some natural fact(s) F. This is the sense of explanation at issue in ethical explanations of moral facts if (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity) are true. For they entail the notion invoked in, say, (Utilitarianism*) is metaphysical grounding, and it is widely agreed that successful metaphysical grounding explanations are not subject to epistemic constraints, like whether they are cognitively illuminating to every agent or whether they generate understanding in those who hear them.

The alternative reading is that M is fully explained by some natural fact(s) F in the *act-*sense of explanation. The thought here is that explaining to an agent why M obtains by appeal only to some natural fact(s) F would provide an explanation that, for example, will be cognitively illuminating for the hearer and that they will come to fully understand why M obtains.

¹⁹³ See Wilkenfeld (2014) for excellent discussion of this distinction.

My opponent suggests that the normative relevance argument shows that moral metaphysical theorising regarding moral explanation remains worth pursuing if we want to discover whether naturalism or non-naturalism is true, assuming (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity). We can now see why this is a mistake.

For the normative relevance argument to entail that moral naturalism is false if (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) are true, (P2) must be non-trivially true in the *relevant* sense of explanation to that which ethical claims appeal to if they are claims about metaphysical grounding. But it is not.

Given the distinction between the act and product senses of explanation, there are two corresponding notions of normative relevance that (P2) may concern. The first is epistemic: some fact(s) is (are) normatively relevant when that fact justifies some further fact, and when appeal to the justifying fact *cognitively aids* an agent in understanding why some action has the moral property it does when someone cites this feature to them. The second: some fact(s) is (are) normatively relevant when they happen to be part of the full metaphysical ground of a normative (here, moral) fact – being so *makes them* normatively relevant in this sense.

So, we have two readings of (P2),

(P2-P) A successful explanation *in the product sense* of why M obtains given F assumes that F has normative relevance in the *non-epistemic* sense, since it is only if and because F is normatively relevant in the *non-epistemic* sense that it can explain M.

(P2-A) A successful explanation *in the act sense* of why M obtains given F assumes that F has normative relevance in the *epistemic* sense, since it is only if and because F is normatively relevant in the *epistemic* sense that it can explain M.

The latter is true. A successful act of explaining why some M obtains given F will depend upon F being normatively relevant in the sense that appealing to it will be illuminating to an agent who hears that explanation, aiding complete understanding of why M obtains. But (P2-A) is *not* the sense of ‘explanation’ or ‘normative relevance’ that ethical grounding claims concern if (Unity) and (Ethical Grounding) are true.

For metaphysical grounding claims are supposed to be explanations in the *product* sense and are not subject to the epistemic constraints of acts of explanation. And (P2-P) is true, if (Unity) and (Ethical Grounding) are: a successful grounding explanation of M by F depends upon F being normatively relevant in the non-epistemic sense of being part of M’s full grounds. But if M is fully grounded in F given (P1), then (P2-P) is *trivially* true. Moreover, it does not entail *anything* about the dispute between naturalism or non-naturalism. Rather, it turns the normative relevance argument into the familiar observation that it is unclear whether there are ungrounded grounding claims, whether any grounding claims can ground themselves, and whether some grounding circularity is possible.

But wouldn’t *those* questions be relevant to whether naturalism or non-naturalism is true? They would. For example, if there are ungrounded ethical facts, then non-naturalism will be true. But, crucially, given (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity), to ask these questions of *ethical* grounding claims is to invite *ethical* reflection: to see whether ethical grounding claims could be ungrounded, ground themselves, or non-viciously ground one another, we must investigate what the plausible ethical grounding claims are, that is, do ethics.

The normative relevance argument does not show that metaphysical theorising continues to play any important role in assessing moral naturalism or non-naturalism if (Grounding) and (Unity) are true. One might react to the normative relevance argument by thinking that ethical explanations in the product sense are subject to a justificatory condition and an epistemic normative relevance condition. But if one thought that then, as Pekka Väyrynen (2013: 173–175) notes, their thought suggests that normative explanations are *not* metaphysical grounding claims. We might think this motivates either rejecting (Ethical Grounding) and treating normative explanations as *sui generis*, or rejecting (Unity) and positing a normative grounding relation with its own justificatory condition. Neither option, however, is plausible if, as we are assuming, (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity) are true.

An argument from Stephanie Leary (2020; Forthcoming) might provide a stronger case for continued metaphysical theorising in the face of (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) to resolve the naturalism/non-naturalism dispute. Suppose (Utilitarianism*) is true. If so, so is:

(G) The fact that x maximises happiness grounds that x is morally right.

And (G) itself looks like a moral fact because it involves the moral property *rightness*. So, naturalism, as (Grounding) understands it, is true *only if* (G) is fully grounded in natural facts.

But what grounds the grounding facts, like (G)? It is this difficult metaphysical question that might promise to show how metaphysical enquiry into grounding may still have an important role to play in the naturalism/non-naturalism debate. There are at least three answers. As applied to (G), they give us,

(Essence) It is essential of the property *rightness* that if x maximises happiness, x is right
(Fine 2002; 2012; Rosen 2020)

(Law) It is a metaphysical law that the property of *maximising happiness* realises *rightness*,
and that, if Fx and F realises G , then Gx . (Wilsch 2015)

(Explanans) [The fact that x maximises happiness grounds that x is right] is grounded in
[x maximising happiness].¹⁹⁴ (Bennett 2011; deRosset 2013)

The final option, by only appealing to a natural fact of maximising happiness, would allow that (G) is fully grounded in a natural fact. But Leary argues that, as opposed to (Essence) or (Law), (Explanans) is an implausible explanation of (G). As such, any good explanation for (G) will appeal to some fact that involves both *maximising happiness* and *rightness*. But if so, then whatever fact grounds (G) must be another moral fact (since it involves some moral properties). And this just regenerates the questions we asked about (G): if (Law) grounds (G), then either (Law) is ungrounded or it must be grounded in some further moral fact. *Mutatis mutandis* for (Essence). Either way, there are some moral facts that are not fully grounded in natural facts.

First, it is not clear that this argument is sound. Leary quickly dismisses (Explanans), following Shamik Dasgupta (2014: 572), thinking it obviously pales in comparison to the other options. But this ignores the considerable motivation for it.

¹⁹⁴ Henceforth, I'll use square brackets such that, where p is some claim, '[p]' is to be read 'the fact that p '.

Suppose that x is right because x maximises happiness. It seems plausible that, if true, this claim is backed by an argument from the *explanans* to the *explanandum*; call this an *explanatory story* (deRosset 2013). This is an argument one could in principle provide from [x maximises happiness] to [x is right], which would give us [[x is right] because [x maximises happiness]]. To then say [[x is right] because [x maximises happiness]] *because* [x maximises happiness] is not obviously an uninformative explanation if doing so is a way of adverting to the assumed-successful *explanatory story* from [x maximises happiness] to [x is right]. Compare: why is Oxford a city? Presumably because it meets some complex condition X to do with its size, shape, location, etc. So, Oxford is a city because X . Why is Oxford a city because X ? It is not implausible to say: because X (that is, it is locale with a certain size, shape, ..., which makes it is a city). Notice too that this view of grounding explanations can help us see how (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) entail that naturalism and non-naturalism are settled by ethical debate, since whether there is some plausible explanatory story from [x maximises happiness] to [x is right] would be, if those views are true, an *ethical story*.

But suppose Leary's argument is sound. My opponent might then suggest that it establishes, through general metaphysical considerations regarding grounding, that naturalism is false (since it shows that there are some moral facts not fully grounded in natural ones). That would suggest some metaphysical debate in meta-ethics may helpfully resolve the naturalism/non-naturalism debate. Notably, Leary herself denies this. For the argument appeals to general considerations that in principle apply to any other domain of discourse: the argument could be used to show, for example, that mental facts are not fully grounded in physical facts.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Dasgupta (2014) attributes an analogous argument to Sider (2011) as an argument against characterising physicalism in terms of grounding.

The fact that an argument can generalise beyond a domain it may be intended for, however, does not *alone* show that the argument is unsound or that it incorrectly characterises a debate. If the generalisable conclusions are clearly false, then that is important. But whether mental facts are not fully grounded in physical facts is not *obviously* false and it would still fail to show that the argument relied upon a false characterisation of a debate.

But despite appearing to rely on general metaphysical claims about the nature of grounding, what this argument at best shows is that *if* some particular ethical grounding claims are implausible – namely, that (G) is not fully grounded in the fact that x maximises happiness – then there may be a sound argument to non-naturalism from reflection on what other options there may be to ground (G). But if (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) are true, whether the relevant grounding claims are implausible requires, and is settled by, *ethical* reflection. That is, whether the above argument is sound depends upon substantive ethical theorising – e.g., on the plausibility of an explanatory story from [x maximises happiness] to [x is right].

Leary's desired conclusion from the above argument is this: (Grounding) is false. For if correct, her argument shows, she claims, how (Grounding) falsely renders the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism no longer 'a non-trivial, local claim about normativity' (Leary 2020: 478; Forthcoming: 4). Perhaps if the argument of this chapter highlights a consequence of a false – albeit popular – grounding-theoretic way to distinguish naturalism and non-naturalism, then this should trouble me.

But, as Leary notes, there are other grounding-theoretic characterisations of the debate that avoid her argument. Here is one, generated by *restricting* the grounding claims with which our disputants are concerned:

(Grounding*) For all moral properties P and for all entities x : moral naturalism is the view that if Pa, then Pa is fully grounded in a natural fact (or plurality of facts). Moral non-naturalism is the view that for some moral fact(s) Fa, Fa is not fully grounded in a natural fact (or plurality of facts). (Rosen 2017b: 157)

On this view, naturalists and non-naturalists are only concerned with *particular* moral facts: a particular state of affairs being good, a particular action being right, and not with general facts about what grounds facts about what is right, wrong, *inter alia*. So long as all the former facts are fully grounded in natural facts, then we might think that this suffices for naturalism to be true even if there are, for example, some metaphysical laws that involve moral properties which explain these grounding connections.

And by precisely the same argument given above, (Grounding*), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) entail (E) and (F). Take naturalism. If normative ethics establishes that for all moral properties and all entities, the fact that those entities have some moral property is fully grounded in natural facts, then naturalism is true. And naturalism is true only if the correct ethical theory establishes that all particular moral facts are fully grounded in natural ones, since if some moral facts are not so grounded then naturalism is false. *Mutatis mutandis* for non-naturalism.¹⁹⁶

So *even if* Leary's argument shows that (Grounding) is false, other grounding-theoretic characterisations of the naturalist/non-naturalist debate still entail, assuming (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity), that the truth of each view depends upon and is settled by ethical claims about the grounds of ethical facts.

¹⁹⁶ Leary herself notes that (Grounding*) 'cannot be settled by general metaphysical considerations. It must be settled by considering what grounds normative facts in particular' (Leary 2020: 479). This, I've argued, amounts to a revisionary view of the naturalism/non-naturalism debate into one settled by standard ethical debates if (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity) are true.

§4.3. Aren't Grounding Claims Metaphysical?

A final objection: if ethical grounding claims concern metaphysical grounding, then even if (E) and (F) are true, doesn't this entail that ethical grounding claims are in fact partly *metaphysical*, and so are to be assessed by whatever means are appropriate for doing so? Put differently: doesn't my argument show that ethical debates are at least partly *metaphysical debates in disguise*?

If so, then (E) and (F) may not suffice for the naturalist/non-naturalist debate to be settled by ethical debate. Instead, perhaps they have the *opposite* consequence: ethical debates now partly involve making metaphysical claims in ways we've previously unacknowledged. The methodological challenges mentioned above, then, may be ones we *must* face, given (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity).¹⁹⁷

If there is only one metaphysical grounding relation, then (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity) do entail that explanatory ethical claims are also in some sense 'metaphysical'. But what does it mean to say that ethical grounding claims are 'metaphysical' and so (Utilitarianism*) is both a normative ethical and partly a meta-ethical, metaphysical claim, as Berker (2018) has argued? In particular, why think this is not merely a terminological point that entails nothing about how to assess ethical claims or theories?

Berker does not say. I have elsewhere offered two readings Berker may have intended (Akhlaghi 2021b). Neither, however, troubles my argument here. First, by 'metaphysical' we might simply mean concerning 'how things are' (as opposed to, say, 'how we know things'). But (Utilitarianism*) is *obviously* metaphysical in this thin sense, and this entails nothing about how to

¹⁹⁷ Berker (2018: 771) may have had this in mind when he claimed that even if (Ethical Grounding) and (Unity) are true we should 'continue to ask all the questions' we did before engaging with either view.

assess it. We might alternatively mean ‘non-conceptual, non-semantic, and non-epistemic’ by ‘metaphysical’. But that ethical grounding claims are not conceptual, semantic, or epistemic claims is what many normative ethicists *already* believe, and does not entail that some distinctly metaphysical considerations are relevant to investigating the grounds of ethical facts. Ethicists grant that whatever method appropriating to doing ethics must somehow generate justification for ethical claims understood as non-conceptual, non-semantic, and non-epistemic claims.¹⁹⁸

So, explanatory ethical claims concerning metaphysical grounding does not entail or suggest that there remains an important role for moral metaphysics (as standardly conceived) to play in ethical debate, nor that ethical debate is somehow partly metaphysical debate in ways beyond merely justifying a terminological choice of calling such debates ‘metaphysical’. The naturalism/non-naturalism debate is a metaphysical debate over the nature of ethical facts. But if (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) are true, ethical grounding claims that entail (and are required by) naturalism or non-naturalism are ethical claims and are to be assessed as such.

§5. Conclusion

It is easy to overlook how different characterisations of a debate, or how a characterisation in conjunction with other claims, may have unforeseen consequences. I have argued that if the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism concerns the grounding of ethical facts, and if the explanatory notion that ethical claims invoke is the notion of metaphysical grounding, then the naturalism/non-naturalism debate is settled by, and depends upon, the correct normative ethical theory or claims concerning the grounds of ethical facts.

¹⁹⁸ This does not entail that ethical grounding claims being metaphysical in this second sense has *no* important consequences. E.g., it would entail that ethical facts are neither semantic nor conceptual (Akhlaghi 2021b: 7–8).

This is a surprising consequence. It entails that the naturalist/non-naturalist debate is settled by what the correct normative ethical claims are, revealing how to usurp moral metaphysical debate with ethical debate analogously to what quasi-realists and some so-called ‘quietist’ realists wish but on fewer and substantially less controversial assumptions. It is a consequence that, I suspect, many who are attracted to (Grounding), (Ethical Grounding), and (Unity) will wish to reject. If their views entail (E) and (F), the only option is to deny one of those three views. Is that plausible? *That* will have to await another occasion.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed, first, to be a clarion call for greater reflection on the nature of metaphysics and ontology within meta-ethics and on the metaphysics and ontology of normativity by meta-metaphysicians. To that end, I offered a sympathetic yet critical treatment of three theories that I argued have been misunderstood or ignored precisely because of the dearth of explicit meta-metaphysical reflection about normativity: non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, and relaxed realism. In each case, careful attention to truthmaker theory, Meinongianism, and ontological pluralism respectively helped clarify each theory and their attractions, respond to many objections against them, and identify the challenges they face.

Together, they cast in stark relief what we stand to gain by taking a *meta-metaphysical turn* in meta-ethics. Most clearly, we dispel the widespread confusion surrounding some ‘quietist’ meta-ethical theories and can explore the rich case of normativity for meta-metaphysical theorising. And should any of the above theories work, we gain ways to adopt forms of non-naturalistic normative realism whilst avoiding standard metaphysical objections to such theories. But notice that, despite the revolutionary consequences for meta-ethics that would follow, they are but a very small part of what the meta-metaphysical turn may offer. It offers no less than the prospects of progress in normative metaphysics where it is hard to not feel that stalemate has been reached partly because meta-ethics is often so meta-metaphysically quiet. For if, as the quote from Skorupski I began this thesis with is correct and we have reached a stalemate, then progress can be made only if we reject or revise some assumptions. I have suggested some such assumptions may be about the nature of metaphysics and ontology. Our only hope for examining them is to turn to explicitly *doing* some meta-metaphysics.

Some may think that widespread discussion over minimalism and non-minimalism about belief, truth, facts, *inter alia* in meta-ethics already is such work. I hope to have shown here how mistaken it would be to suggest that those debates exhaust those most salient to understanding and doing normative metaphysics. Those issues do not settle what general meta-metaphysical framework we should adopt, more particular debates over theories of ontological commitment or the nature of existence, questions of the epistemology of normative metaphysics, and much more I have discussed. Moreover, debates over minimalism and non-minimalism – and how to understand what such views amount to – themselves take place within often wholly implicit background meta-metaphysical frameworks.

I take Chapters 1–4 also to cast strong doubt over whether there is any view usefully called ‘meta-ethical quietism’. First, the term ‘quietism’ (and ‘relaxed’ when used to refer to the same set of views) obscures the crucial differences between the views so designated, as I’ve argued here. Second, ‘quietism’ encourages an understanding of such theories as objectionably refusing to answer certain questions. This ignores how, if such views are correct, certain questions are *rightfully* ignored or understood in some revisionary manner. Third, calling such views ‘quietist’ characterises them by what they reject and obscures what they accept. Finally, who is failing to ask the right questions depends upon what those are. Calling such views forms of ‘quietism’ obfuscates the fact that those who reject the radical reconceptions of normative metaphysics they offer are, from the ‘quietist’ perspective, in some sense quiet about important questions in normative metaphysics. Given that our meta-philosophical assumptions shape what we think we should be discussing, we would do better to characterise these views ‘from within’ their own theories, as I have, as opposed to by what they reject. These theorists are *anything but quiet* and, relative to most meta-ethicists, they are as *meta-metaphysically loud* as can be, even if some ‘quietists’ have not been as clear as they should about this important fact.

Taxonomic choices, of course, are sometimes justified by their usefulness. And we might think it has been useful to group theories like Parfit's and Scanlon's together. Perhaps it was useful initially to indicate that these views are different in some hard-to-specify way from, say, the non-naturalism of David Enoch, by grouping them together as most have. But doing so has also, I think, led to deep and pervasive confusion over the details of these theories and what they stand to teach us about the prospects of future reflection on the metaphysics of normativity. So, I believe we should retire the term 'meta-ethical quietism'.¹⁹⁹

The second aim of the thesis was to explore two further, related questions. The first was whether the moral error theory was epistemically possible and, if so, what follows from this. I argued that it is epistemically possible, that its epistemic possibility generates an argument against not only the three views mentioned above but also any form of moral non-cognitivism or naturalism, and that whether it is epistemically possible is an important and oft-ignored meta-ethical fault line. The second question was whether there was a way to dismiss some or all standard moral metaphysical debate by appeal to less controversial assumptions than the above views accept. I argued that there is: the combination of three widespread views – a grounding-theoretic drawing of the naturalism/non-naturalism distinction, the view that the 'because' throughout ethics indicates grounding, and that there is only one grounding relation of metaphysical grounding – entails that the naturalism/non-naturalism debate is settled by ethical debate alone. I argued further that this suggests that concerned meta-ethicists should engage in normative ethics instead.

¹⁹⁹ I defend this at length in Akhlaghi (Forthcoming-2).

Many questions remain. Can non-realist cognitivism justify rejecting truthmaker maximalism without demotivating truthmaking altogether? Does normative trivialism succeed in offering such a justification? Is irrealist cognitivism able to offer a plausible comprehension principle and make a case for reason relations as objective, mind-independent irreal objects that avoids the dilemma it faces? Can relaxed realists offer the form of ontological pluralism they require and meet the anti-exceptionalism challenge? Is the epistemic possibility of wholesale moral error really a matter which puts everything up for grabs at once in meta-ethics and, if so, how should we adjudicate such disputes? Should moral metaphysicians who are friends of grounding give up on standard moral metaphysics and do ethics instead and, if not, which of the three claims that jointly entail this is false? Are there any historical precursors to ‘quietist’ meta-ethical theories, and can we learn anything from them? And, if we want to adopt a form of non-naturalism that promises to avoid standard metaphysical objections, should we prefer non-realist cognitivism, irrealist cognitivism, or relaxed realism?

Other questions raised are more general. What role should truthmaker theory play in normative metaphysics? What are the best versions of Meinongian meta-ethical theories? What are the most plausible forms of ontological pluralism in meta-ethics? What is the best theory of ontological commitment and what does it entail for normative metaphysics? Should we take an existence-first or a theory-first approach to normative metaphysics? What other meta-metaphysical issues lie under the surface of meta-ethical debate and unwittingly shape it?

I hope here, in the end, to have made a case for future normative metaphysics to be anything but quiet about the meta-metaphysics of normativity and the myriad questions it raises. Nothing short of the future of normative metaphysics depends upon it. I, for one, hope to be as loud as I can be.

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