

May 2016

# Earning the Right Means Paying the Costs: Metaphysical Problems for Quasi-Realism

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EARNING THE RIGHT MEANS PAYING THE COSTS: METAPHYSICAL PROBLEMS  
FOR QUASI-REALISM

by

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A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in Philosophy

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2016

ABSTRACT  
EARNING THE RIGHT MEANS PAYING THE COSTS: METAPHYSICAL PROBLEMS  
FOR QUASI-REALISM

by

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016  
Under the Supervision of Professor Husi

Quasi-realism is a metaethical program seeking to 'earn the right' to realist moral discourse without positing mind-independent moral properties and facts. However, Sharon Street argues that *if* quasi-realism successfully captures realist discourse, it will find itself equally susceptible to the same objections as ordinary moral realism. But although Street argues extensively that *epistemological* challenges will carry over to quasi-realism, more argumentation is necessary to establish that quasi-realism is also vulnerable to *metaphysical* challenges. In this paper, I evaluate whether quasi-realism is susceptible to metaphysical challenges to moral realism by applying a particular metaphysical objection – J.L. Mackie's 'argument from queerness' – to Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn's quasi-realist projects. In the end, I conclude that quasi-realism can only escape metaphysical challenges at the cost of its principal aim; namely, earning the right to realist discourse. In this way, Street's claim can be vindicated.

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Quasi-realism is a metaethical program seeking to ‘earn the right’<sup>1</sup> to realist moral discourse from an essentially anti-realist standpoint. According to quasi-realism, we can vindicate the realist nature of our moral language without appealing to problematic moral properties and facts. This represents an attractive prospect; being able to gain all the benefits of ordinary moral realism without facing the traditional metaphysical and epistemological challenges. Quasi-realism promises that we can straightforwardly realize this ambition once the meaning of our moral discourse is properly explained. Providing such an explanation is the work of the program.

However, although quasi-realism offers significant advantages, many philosophers contend that it’s illegitimately trying to “have one’s cake and eat it too.”<sup>2</sup> Most of the effort to refute quasi-realism focuses on its alleged failure to capture realist discourse. In my opinion, though, Sharon Street has the more interesting and effective approach; arguing that *if* the program is successful in capturing realist discourse, it will find itself equally susceptible to the same objections as ordinary moral realism.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Street emphasizes that a successful quasi-realist account must take on the *epistemological* challenges of moral realism. But although she intimates that metaphysical challenges will also carry over, the limits of her analysis leave this claim largely untested. In this paper, I argue that her metaphysical contention can be vindicated, and is actually critical to refuting the quasi-realist project.

In order to refute quasi-realism, I’ll first introduce a particular realist objection – J.L. Mackie’s ‘argument from queerness’.<sup>4</sup> I’ll then show that Allan Gibbard’s quasi-realist project is

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Street, “Mind Independence Without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can’t Have It Both Ways,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. Ed. Russ Schafer-Landau, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Street focuses on her personal objection to realism – the so-called “Darwinian dilemma” – Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies* (2006).

<sup>4</sup> J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

just as susceptible to Mackie's objection as ordinary moral realism. After this, I'll offer Simon Blackburn's account as an alternative approach that escapes Mackie's objection. However, I'll ultimately contend that Blackburn's account fails at quasi-realism's central ambition of earning the right to realist discourse. Finally, I'll generalize; arguing that Gibbard and Blackburn's problems reflect a critical dilemma in the quasi-realist strategy: Namely, that *if* quasi-realism is successful in capturing realist discourse, it will be just as susceptible to metaphysical challenges as ordinary moral realism.

### I. MACKIE'S ARGUMENT FROM QUEERNESS

Before arguing that Mackie's argument from queerness applies to quasi-realism, it's necessary to understand the objection. As with any classic argument, Mackie's objection has a diversity of interpretations. However, I believe that Richard Joyce provides the most plausible reading.<sup>5</sup> According to Joyce, Mackie's argument contains two basic steps: one conceptual, and the other substantive. The conceptual step claims that moral realism is committed to properties that issue 'objective prescriptions'. While the substantive step argues that there *aren't* any objective prescriptions; thus refuting moral realism.<sup>6</sup> But what are these objective prescriptions driving Mackie's argument? According to Joyce, objective prescriptions are best understood as categorical imperatives that give *reasons* for action, regardless of one's desires or interests.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation fits with Mackie's own explanation of objective prescriptions, when Mackie states

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<sup>5</sup> Joyce bases his interpretation on an influential paper by Richard Garner (Garner 1990). However, David Brink offers a contrasting interpretation of Mackie's argument from queerness (Brink 1997). According to Brink, Mackie's objective prescriptions have a key *motivational* component. This entails that judging some act morally good motivates one to act accordingly. However, as Joyce points out, this account has difficulty making sense of Mackie's talk of objective prescriptivity as a queer *property*. If Mackie's objection is based on inherently motivating moral judgments, this implies an objection to a certain characterization of *agents*, not properties in the world. But as Mackie consistently refers to the queerness of properties, this interpretation appears untenable.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce, 37.

that, “to say they are intrinsically action-guiding is to say that the reasons that they give for doing or not doing something are independent of that agent’s desires or purposes.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it makes best sense of the ‘queerness’ Mackie attributes to moral properties.

Under Joyce’s interpretation, Mackie’s argument from queerness proceeds as follows: Moral realism posits categorical imperatives that “imply that persons have *reasons* to act regardless of their desires or interests – and in this way... (putatively) bind persons.”<sup>9</sup> These distinctive categorical imperatives are called ‘objective prescriptions’. Moreover, according to moral realism, these objective prescriptions simply issue from moral properties. Yet, *other* properties – color or shape, for instance – don’t give any such overriding reasons for action. Thus, moral properties have a certain ‘queer’ characteristic; committing moral realism to “qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”<sup>10</sup> And because moral realism is committed to such ontological extravagancies, we should reject the view.<sup>11</sup>

## II. GIBBARD’S PROJECT

The two major proponents of quasi-realism – Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard – both combine their quasi-realist project with an expressivist account of moral language. According to expressivism, the meaning of moral language is best understood as an expression of certain states of mind, like disapproval. This notion of expression can be understood in terms of statements like, ‘the grass is green’. On an expressivist account, when someone states ‘the grass is green’

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<sup>8</sup> J.L Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Joyce, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Mackie, *Ethics*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> The moral realist has two main responses to Mackie’s objection: Either she can acknowledge the ‘queerness’ of moral properties, but deny that this unique characteristic is objectionable. Or she can deny that moral realism is necessarily committed to objective prescriptions (at least as defined by Mackie). I think *both* responses are promising, but Mackie’s argument still remains a legitimate challenge for moral realism to address.

they're *expressing* their belief that the grass is green. This is contrasted with someone who makes the statement, 'I believe the grass is green'. In this case, they're merely *reporting* that same belief. Expressivists claim that our moral language functions like the statement 'the grass is green'; only the relevant attitude gaining expression is not a belief, but a different kind of attitude.<sup>12</sup>

Although expressivism and quasi-realism are distinct projects, there are significant incentives to combine the two. For quasi-realism, if there aren't moral facts or properties to refer to, it makes sense that the meaning of our moral language isn't descriptive (or cognitive), but instead expressive. For expressivism, quasi-realism promises to earn the right to realist discourse without moral facts or properties; allowing expressivists to make objective moral claims often thought incompatible with such a semantic account. Thus, although expressivism and quasi-realism are separable, it makes sense to combine them.

In Allan Gibbard's book, *Thinking How to Live*, he articulates what I believe is the most thorough expressivist plus quasi-realist package.<sup>13</sup> According to Gibbard, the states of mind expressed by our moral language are *planning* states. Furthermore, Gibbard claims that we can better explain the distinctive and sometimes puzzling character of our moral concepts by understanding them within the context of our broad planning perspective.<sup>14</sup> In order to motivate his argument, Gibbard first examines the concept of 'being the thing to do'. This is a commonsense concept to test his account, as it clearly seems involved in planning, and has a distinctly normative character.<sup>15</sup> Gibbard's hope is that once we see the explanatory benefits of his analysis of 'being the thing to do' in plan-laden terms, we'll be convinced that many *other*

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Schroeder, *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, (London: Routledge, 2010), 73.

<sup>13</sup> This is Street's term.

<sup>14</sup> Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Particularly if you accept Gibbard's claim that 'being the thing to do' is essentially the same as 'being the thing you *ought* to do'.

normative concepts function similarly – including our moral concepts. This explanation of our moral concepts will consequently elucidate the plan-laden nature of our moral language.

Gibbard’s expressivist account of moral language in terms of planning attitudes naturally informs his quasi-realist project. Thus, just as with the rest of our moral language, Gibbard explains *realist* moral discourse in terms of expressions of certain types of plans.<sup>16</sup> For example, Gibbard provides the following interpretation of instances of realist discourse:

“Normative facts are out there, subsisting independently of us” might just be a fancy way of putting an aspect of a plan for living...“It’s a normative fact, out there independent of us, that one ought not to kick dogs for fun.” Accepting this might amount to avoid kicking dogs for fun, planning this even for the contingency of being someone who approves of such fun, and who is surrounded by people who approve.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Gibbard’s interpretations represent a fundamental quasi-realist strategy; one of demonstrating how language that might seem metaethical, or second-order, is actually just ordinary first-order talk, “arrayed in sumptuous rhetoric.”<sup>18</sup> As the examples demonstrate, Gibbard accomplishes this through his plan-based expressivist account of moral language.

Plans are clearly made with reference to the facts of a given situation. Thus, Gibbard offers an explanation of the relationship between our plan-laden normative concepts and the relevant facts. Using the concept of ‘being okay to do’ as an example, Gibbard explains the association in terms of two types of relations – *supervenience* and *constitution*. Supervenience is the weaker of the two relations; captured by the intuitive notion that “two acts in two possible situations differ in being okay or not only if they differ, somehow, in their prosaically factual properties.”<sup>19</sup> However, the stronger and more interesting relation is that of constitution. On

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<sup>16</sup> Gibbard, Chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> Gibbard, 186.

<sup>18</sup> Gibbard, 186.

<sup>19</sup> Gibbard, 90. Supervenience relations come in many forms – usually as a way to relate two classes of properties. Gibbard instead uses it to describe the relationship between concepts (specifically normative ones) and factual properties.

Gibbard's account, anyone in the business of planning is committed to what he terms the 'Claim of Factual Constitution':

There is a prosaically factual property  $F$  such that for any act  $a$  open in any possible situation  $s$ , act  $a$  is okay to do in  $s$  just in case  $a$  in  $s$  has property  $F$ .

Which he reduces to the following claim:

There is a factual property that constitutes being okay to do.<sup>20</sup>

Gibbard then goes on to assert that not only are we committed to some factual property constituting our normative concepts, but that there *is* such a property.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Gibbard claims that for each normative concept, there is some corresponding factual property that constitutes it in the manner described above.

In order to clarify this constitution relation, Gibbard uses the example of water and H<sub>2</sub>O. In particular, he explains the relevant constitution relation between water and H<sub>2</sub>O in terms of two further relations: First, water and H<sub>2</sub>O are necessarily *coextensional*, in that necessarily everything that's water is H<sub>2</sub>O, and vice versa. Secondly, there is a sort of *explanatory dependence* – meaning that the features of water are explained by it being H<sub>2</sub>O (by its chemical structure).<sup>22</sup> These two relations – coextensionality and explanatory dependence – comprise Gibbard's notion of constitution.

Gibbard also emphasizes that there is no *conceptual* mistake in not recognizing the constitution relation between water and H<sub>2</sub>O. Indeed, historically we know that there was legitimate scientific debate about which property constitutes water. Moreover, this debate was not the result of any misunderstanding about the concept in question – but simply a disagreement

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<sup>20</sup> Gibbard, 96.

<sup>21</sup> He calls this transition the transcendental turn of his argument because, like Kant, he aims to establish a certain claim by showing that our commitment to it is indispensable. A given planner can be totally "agnostic" about what this property is, but must simply be committed to there *being* some such property.

<sup>22</sup> Gibbard, 95.

about what exactly explains the features of this shared water concept. Nonetheless, Gibbard's essential point is that regardless of this legitimate debate, there exists some property that *actually* constitutes water.

This analogy can also be reinterpreted within the context of a case of moral disagreement. For instance, suppose a Kantian and utilitarian are arguing about 'the good'. In order to understand them as having a legitimate debate – and not simply talking past each other – there must be some shared concept ('the good') at the center of this dispute. At the very least, we can imagine that a fundamental feature of this concept is that it represents what to do in a given situation. For the Kantian, the property that constitutes 'the good' will have to do with the categorical imperative, while for the utilitarian it will involve maximized utility. Nevertheless, both agree that *there is* some property (broadly construed) that constitutes this shared concept of 'the good'.

### III. GIBBARD SUSCEPTIBLE TO MACKIE'S OBJECTION

According to Gibbard, there is nothing 'queer' about whatever property constitutes a given normative concept. In fact, he claims that it's compatible with his account that such a property is wholly naturalistic.<sup>23</sup> However, despite this purported naturalism regarding properties, Gibbard's notion of constitution is problematic. Because of this problematic constitution relation, I contend that his account is still just as susceptible to Mackie's argument from queerness as ordinary moral realism.

In order to understand the problems with Gibbard's constitution relation, it helps to examine it in terms of a particular normative concept; for example, the common moral concept,

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<sup>23</sup> Gibbard's definition of what defines a naturalistic property is slightly peculiar (see Gibbard 105), but it is close enough to standard usage within metaethics.

‘being the right thing to do’. If we apply the Claim of Factual Constitution to ‘being the right thing to do’, we get the following claim:

There is a prosaically factual property  $F$  such that for any act  $a$  open in any possible situation  $s$ , act  $a$  is *the right thing to do* in  $s$  just in case  $a$  in  $s$  has property  $F$ .

In this form, one might already anticipate problems for Gibbard; but as explained above, this constitution claim can be further understood in terms of coextensionality and explanatory dependence. I will argue that both of these relations leave Gibbard susceptible to Mackie’s objection.

In terms of coextensionality, the Claim of Factual Constitution implies that if a given act  $a$  open in possible situation  $s$  is the right thing to do, it necessarily has property  $F$ , and vice versa. Moreover, as with water and  $H_2O$ , this relation holds *independent* of one’s attitudes concerning the right thing to do. But although this might accurately capture the relevant relation, it nonetheless leaves Gibbard susceptible to Mackie’s objection. Recall that Mackie’s objection is based on the objective prescriptivity of moral properties. Specifically, the fact that these properties issue reasons for action regardless of our desires or interests. If Gibbard’s account implies that the right thing to do is necessitated by property  $F$  – independent of one’s attitudes – it seems that such a property would have precisely this objective prescriptivity. Thus, even though property  $F$  may be wholly naturalistic, the coextensional relation it bears to a given moral concept introduces exactly the kind of queerness at the core of Mackie’s objection.

Gibbard’s description of the constitution relation in terms of explanatory dependence only furthers the problem. Once again, if we consider water and  $H_2O$ , the explanatory dependence relation makes sense – the features of water are explained by it being  $H_2O$ . Yet, given our scientific knowledge about this relationship, we know that the *full* explanation likely involves some sort of causal relation. Thus, although Gibbard leaves it ambiguous as to what it

means for a property to explain the features of its associated concept, at least in the case of water and H<sub>2</sub>O, the proper explanation involves some sort of causal notion. However, this is problematic for the constitution of our moral concepts. For instance, if it turns out that property *F* causes some act to be the right thing to do, this makes property *F* almost indistinguishable from the moral properties that Mackie claims are queer. But the worry is that however else this relationship is clarified it will leave Gibbard even more susceptible to Mackie's objection.

Finally, it's critical to remember that we are comparing Gibbard's quasi-realist account to ordinary moral realism. Thus, what's important is whether Gibbard is any *better* equipped to handle Mackie's argument from queerness – and I claim that he's not. For instance, one might think that Gibbard's naturalism regarding properties is still *some* advantage over ordinary moral realism, in response to Mackie's objection. However, there are two reasons this isn't a distinct advantage: The first is that there are naturalist forms of ordinary moral realism that can say exactly the same kinds of things. So Gibbard cannot claim an advantage in this respect. Secondly, the core of Mackie's objection – the objective prescriptivity of our moral properties – still holds if these moral properties are wholly naturalistic. In particular, Gibbard's prosaically factual properties are 'queer' on Mackie account because of their *relations* with our moral concepts. This means that Gibbard's project is just as susceptible to Mackie's objection as ordinary moral realism.

#### IV. BLACKBURN'S ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT

My claim so far is that Gibbard's quasi-realist project is just as susceptible to Mackie's argument from queerness as ordinary moral realism. However, the stronger claim that I want to make is that *any successful* quasi-realist account will run into the same problem. Although I take Gibbard's failure as a significant step towards this conclusion, more work is necessary to support

this claim. In particular, I must consider if there are alternatives to Gibbard's account that might be able to avoid Mackie's objection. Given that we're dealing with a metaphysical challenge, I think the obvious move is to consider an alternate account with weaker metaphysical commitments. Indeed, if Gibbard's constitution relation is what makes his account susceptible to Mackie's objection, perhaps quasi-realism can escape the objection by eliminating such concepts.

Conveniently, Blackburn's expressivist plus quasi-realist package meets the desideratum. In contrast to Gibbard, Blackburn's expressivist account takes *disapproval* as the state of mind expressed by our moral language. Moreover, instead of focusing on planning, Blackburn uses a metaphor of *projecting* to explain how our normative concepts function.<sup>24</sup> According to this account, observing a particular situation – one human being causing another pain, for instance – engenders within us certain sentiments. We then project these sentiments onto the world, causing us to judge that this situation has a certain normative property (e.g. wrongness). It's crucial to note that Blackburn's 'projectivist' account is simply a causal explanation, not a theory about the *sources* of our obligations.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Blackburn is so often misrepresented in this respect that he's recently avoided even talking in terms of projection.<sup>26</sup> However, as long as we acknowledge this distinction, I believe the metaphor can still be useful.

For current purposes, what's most important about Blackburn's projectivist account is that it allows Blackburn to remain more firmly anti-realist, while also having an explanation for why we often talk as if there are mind-independent (or objective) normative properties. This fits nicely into his quasi-realist project, as a sort of validation for our realist moral discourse.

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<sup>24</sup> Blackburn attributes the basis of such a theory to Hume, who spoke of the human practice of "gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment." (David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Ed. Tom Beauchamp, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) Appendix 1).

<sup>25</sup> Simon Blackburn, "Must We Weep for Sentimentalism?" *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*. Ed. James Dreier, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 146.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Blackburn, "Truth, Beauty and Goodness." *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. Ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 301.

Moreover, Blackburn's account doesn't make the kinds of problematic constitution claims that leave Gibbard susceptible to Mackie's objection. Thus, it appears that Blackburn's expressivist plus quasi-realist package offers significant advantages over Gibbard's version.

But can Blackburn actually evade Mackie's argument from queerness? In order to answer this question, it's helpful to look at Blackburn's own essay, *Errors and the Phenomenology of Value*. In this piece, Blackburn is responding directly to Mackie – contrasting his own form of anti-realism with Mackie's:

...[Mackie] cites Russell's feeling that on a particular moral issue...one does not just express a desire that the thing should not happen, but one does so while feeling that one's desires on such a matter are right. Mackie thinks that this is a claim to objectivity, and as such erroneous. The quasi-realist will see it instead as a proper, necessary expression of an attitude toward our own attitudes.<sup>27</sup>

Essentially, where Blackburn thinks Mackie goes wrong is in assuming that the realist nature of our moral discourse necessarily implies certain metaphysical claims. In fact, this is the same mistake that quasi-realists think that ordinary moral realists make; and which they intend to correct. According to Blackburn, the realist nature of our moral discourse can instead be understood simply 'as a proper, necessary expression of an attitude toward our own attitudes'.

Given the details of Blackburn's quasi-realist project, I think we must conclude that his account is *not* susceptible to Mackie's argument from queerness. As Blackburn explains, his own account fundamentally disagrees with Mackie regarding the nature of our moral discourse. In this way, Gibbard and Blackburn are actually on equal footing, as they both explain realist moral discourse without reference to moral properties – Gibbard in terms of types of plans, and Blackburn in terms of second-order attitudes. But where Blackburn's account has a further advantage, is in eschewing robust metaphysical claims about the relationship between our

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<sup>27</sup> Simon Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," *Essays in Quasi-realism*. Ed. Simon Blackburn, (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 152-3.

normative judgments (or concepts), and factual properties of the world. Although our judgments arise from sentiments in response to factual properties, according to Blackburn, he never says that there is any sort of underlying constitution relation between a given factual property and some normative concept. Because Blackburn resists making such metaphysical claims, his quasi-realist account is impervious to Mackie's objection.

## V. PROBLEMS WITH BLACKBURN'S ACCOUNT

Recall that my essential contention is that if quasi-realism is successful in capturing realist discourse, it will be just as susceptible to metaphysical challenges as ordinary moral realism. I've argued that Gibbard is susceptible to Mackie's argument from queerness, but that Blackburn is able to escape this objection. However, the question still remains whether Blackburn's quasi-realism is ultimately successful. After all, if Blackburn's account is able to escape the objection simply by failing to capture realist discourse, then his quasi-realist account fails by its own lights.

In the following section, I will argue that Blackburn cannot make good on quasi-realism's central ambition of earning the right to realist discourse. There are two reasons for this failure: The first is that Blackburn's metaethical account is insufficient, and any attempt to fill in the details will leave him in a difficult position. The second is that he's unable to account for a portion of our realist discourse, so he cannot claim to have earned the right to all the realist claims that we make in our moral discourse. I will explain each of these charges in turn.

As mentioned before, one of the most common errors when attempting to criticize Blackburn's project is mistaking his projectivist explanation as an account of the sources of our obligations. As Blackburn emphatically asserts, "the obligations you lie under, like the debts you

owe, don't decrease or disappear when you stop caring about them."<sup>28</sup> For example, the fact that you might not care about your child doesn't mean you're not morally responsible for their wellbeing. According to Blackburn, our moral judgments may be the 'children of our sentiments' in some sense, but that doesn't mean that our sentiments determine the truth conditions of such judgments. That kind of mind-dependency is something Blackburn outright denies. Indeed, he's adamant that we have every right to condemn a neglectful parent in virtue of the harm done to the child.

However, even though Blackburn claims his quasi-realist account is just as mind-independent as ordinary moral realism, we might question this claim. Certainly Blackburn's right that when we criticize a neglectful parent, we usually do so in virtue of the harm done to the child – and these are essentially mind-independent grounds. But according to Blackburn, the moral judgment that harming children is wrong is *itself* an expression of our sentiments. Thus, the worry arises that in some further sense the wrongness of child neglect is ultimately mind-dependent on his account. For example, imagine a world in which everyone approved of neglecting one's children. Ordinary moral realists can argue that such neglect would still be wrong. Can Blackburn plausibly make the same claim?

Blackburn is used to fending off charges that his account is ultimately mind-dependent, so he has a rather powerful response to such claims. According to Blackburn, dependency questions regarding our values can only be heard and answered 'internally'. For instance, when asked to consider a world in which everyone approved of child neglect, Blackburn argues that all we can do is evaluate such a world from our own internal perspective. In such a case, we'll inevitably judge these neglectful people condemnable once again – but this will only verify our

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<sup>28</sup> Blackburn, "Must We Weep for Sentimentalism," 146.

previous judgment. However, as Blackburn argues, there isn't a further external question to be asked, if we assume expressivism:

We might be tempted to think that there must be [an external question of dependency], that people must be dragged willy-nilly into the halls of metaphysics. But this would only be so if we ignore expressivism. If we think expressivism is false, we might believe in a normative or evaluative "truth condition", a fact, or ontologically heavy "truth-maker", an environmentally pressing real law or chunk of glowing normativity which might indeed have its own strange pattern of comings and goings and its own dependencies, or its own magical immunity to contingent fact. But according to expressivism our activities of evaluation invoke no such mysteries, so there is no external question of dependency either.<sup>29</sup>

By denying these types of external questions, Blackburn thinks that his quasi-realist account can say everything *that there is to say* about the mind-independence of value. Because of this, he believes he's earned the right to realist moral discourse.

However, Blackburn simply hasn't done enough to support his claim that external questions of dependency are illegitimate. Indeed, it's puzzling that Blackburn thinks that assuming expressivism obviates external questions. As mentioned before, he's often quick to emphasize that the projectivist/expressivist part of his project is *not* an account of the sources of our obligations. Thus, it's strange that he thinks that expressivism itself could preclude external questions of dependency. Perhaps Blackburn's thought is that because his causal account doesn't rely on any moral properties – so-called 'chunks of glowing normativity' – external questions don't apply. But this seems mistaken. Just because his account doesn't posit moral properties, doesn't mean that he needn't address external questions. It simply means that he cannot appeal to moral properties in order to address them. Thus, he still owes an answer to external questions of dependency.

In order to demonstrate Blackburn's deficiency, imagine the conversation one might have with some sort of moral skeptic. For instance, suppose this skeptic wants to know why he

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<sup>29</sup> Blackburn, "Truth, Beauty and Goodness," 300.

shouldn't kick dogs for fun. Within our everyday moral discourse, we'll probably first tell the skeptic that kicking dogs for fun is wrong. But this won't help. The skeptic wants to know *why* it's wrong. As Blackburn predicts, the next response we'll likely give is that it's wrong because it causes the dog pain. But once again, this won't do. The skeptic may fully understand that it causes the dog pain, but still want to know *why* that makes it wrong. Unlike normal humans, we can imagine his sentiments are such that seeing dogs in pain don't cause him to project any property of wrongness.<sup>30</sup> In this case, it seems that the skeptic is looking not just for an explanation, but also for a *justification* of our moral judgment. This is precisely the kind of external dependency question that Blackburn thinks is illegitimate. Yet, it's hard to see what's illegitimate about the skeptic's line of questioning. Indeed, it's precisely these kinds of questions that metaethics seeks to answer. If Blackburn cannot give us a good reason for denying the validity of such questions, his metaethical account is incomplete.

In fact, Blackburn has an even bigger problem in his rejection of external questions of dependency – he seems to be ruling out a portion of realist moral discourse. Indeed, one of the essential features of realist discourse is precisely this distinction between the dependency of *our values* on our sentiments, and the dependency of value *as such* on some objective feature of the world. Thus, even *if* Blackburn's right that discussion of external dependency is ultimately illegitimate in some sense (I argue that he's not), that's certainly not how we talk when engaged in realist discourse. Consider standard cases of moral disagreement, for instance. These disputes might initially involve an internal dependency claim – 'kicking dogs for fun is wrong because it causes the dogs pain'; but eventually terminate in an external dependency claim – 'it's a moral fact that causing unnecessary pain is wrong'. When engaged in realist discourse we take these to

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<sup>30</sup> This would be the relevant situation according to Blackburn's projectivist explanation. Obviously, non-projectivist accounts would give a different explanation of the moral psychology of the skeptic.

be two legitimate and *distinct* kinds of claims. Moreover, we take the appeal to moral facts or properties to be adding something to our internal claim, not simply a sort of restatement. Thus, it seems that Blackburn is denying the legitimacy of a portion of realist discourse.

Now perhaps Blackburn would contend that I've mischaracterized his view. He might insist that what's illegitimate is simply metaethical theorizing about external questions of dependency; but that within our moral discourse there is nothing illegitimate about this kind of talk. In fact, perhaps Blackburn's quasi-realist account could even explain what kind of attitude this kind of discourse expresses – in the way Gibbard does with planning.<sup>31</sup> However, there are two problems with this response: The first is that it seems arbitrary to assert that metaethical questions of external dependency are fundamentally confused, but that there is nothing wrong with talking this way within the context of everyday moral discourse. If external questions of dependency are illegitimate, surely it's better to just refrain from talking in these terms?

The second problem is that it attributes an objectionable naivety to participants in realist discourse. For instance, when I state that, 'kicking dogs for fun would still be wrong in a world where everyone approved', I *intend* to make an external dependency claim. Specifically, what I want to express isn't simply that I would still disapprove of it, but that it would still be wrong in some mind-independent sense. Yet, according to Blackburn's response, I must be mistaken or confused. What that statement *really* expresses is simply some further attitude towards my disapproval of kicking dogs for fun. However, this seems rather condescending. It's plausible that perhaps we often have no explicit intentions regarding what attitudes we mean to express in our moral discourse. But surely sometimes, we mean to express exactly the kinds of external dependency claims that Blackburn rejects. In this case, Blackburn would be unable to capture this kind of realist discourse.

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<sup>31</sup> Blackburn, "Errors and the Phenomenology of Value," 153.

## VI. STATUS OF THE QUASI-REALIST PROJECT

I've argued that Gibbard's quasi-realist project is susceptible to Mackie's argument from queerness, and that Blackburn's alternative account cannot capture realist moral discourse. Nevertheless, one could counter that there might be other unexplored routes that could rescue quasi-realism from this apparent dilemma. However, I claim that *any* such route will run into the same dilemma faced by Gibbard and Blackburn. Furthermore, I claim that any successful quasi-realist account will be just as susceptible to *all* metaphysical challenges as ordinary moral realism. This is Street's hypothesis, and the one that I wish to vindicate – but it requires further argumentation.

In order to justify the claim that any successful quasi-realist project will be just as susceptible to metaphysical challenges as ordinary moral realism, it's important to remember the fundamental strategy of quasi-realism. Quasi-realism is an attempt to earn the right to realist moral discourse, without taking on the same metaphysical commitments as ordinary moral realism.<sup>32</sup> It's precisely these metaphysical commitments that quasi-realism takes to be superfluous to a proper explanation of our moral discourse; and which supposedly get ordinary moral realism in trouble. Yet, in trying to be able to say everything ordinary moral realists say without the corresponding commitments, quasi-realism has built a dilemma into the very nature of the project. This dilemma is demonstrated by how Gibbard and Blackburn handle Mackie's objection: In order to capture realist discourse, you must offer a plausible account of the mind-

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<sup>32</sup> Quasi-realists might claim that they also avoid taking on problematic *epistemological* commitments associated with ordinary moral realism. However, as is often the case, these epistemological commitments are really secondary. Specifically, it is only in postulating mind-independent moral facts and properties that ordinary moral realists are then committed to certain claims about our epistemic access to these facts and properties. Thus, I take it that if quasi-realism can avoid taking on the same metaphysical commitments as ordinary moral realism, they also avoid taking on the resultant epistemological commitments.

independence of value, but in doing so you open yourself up to classic metaphysical challenges to ordinary moral realism.

Indeed, it seems clear that the entire dilemma for quasi-realism comes down to an issue of dependency. Ordinary moral realism grounds the mind-independency of moral value in objective features of the world – moral facts or properties. Quasi-realism seeks to make the same claims to mind-independency without resorting to any such entities. But as Gibbard demonstrates, in order to plausibly capture realist discourse one ends up saying things that sound problematically close to ordinary moral realism. In this case, the metaphysical advantages appear to slip away, and traditional challenges to ordinary moral realism take hold. Furthermore, any attempt to simply excuse oneself from engaging in metaethical issues of dependency is illegitimate. Therefore, although it is theoretically open to quasi-realists to choose any dependency account they wish, the one thing they cannot do is evade this task.

Once quasi-realism is forced to answer metaethical questions regarding the dependency of value, the full dilemma becomes apparent: In order to plausibly capture realist discourse, any successful quasi-realist account must be able to vindicate the mind-independency of value. However, in order to achieve this vindication, quasi-realists must make commitments that leave them just as susceptible to metaphysical challenges as ordinary moral realism. Because of this, there is strong reason to believe that *any* successful quasi-realist account will inherit *all* metaphysical challenges from ordinary moral realism. In this way, quasi-realism's attempt to earn the right to realist discourse can only be accomplished by paying the associated costs. As is often the case, the benefits of moral realism don't come for free.

## VII. MINIMALISM IN ETHICS

I've argued that quasi-realism has a critical tension at the core of the project – one that makes it impossible for the program to accomplish its central objectives. However, it will be instructive to take a step back and consider the precise source of this dilemma. In order to do so, it will be necessary to examine the fundamental quasi-realist strategy – that of taking ordinary realist language and explaining it in terms that don't rely on supposedly problematic moral facts and properties. As Jamie Dreier and others point out, this strategy can be properly understood as an instance of a broader meta-philosophical approach, often referred to as 'deflationism' or 'minimalism'.<sup>33</sup> I contend that once we properly contextualize quasi-realism as a minimalist approach to metaethics, we can better understand its faults, and perhaps suggest alternative ways to make good on its ambitions.

Minimalism is perhaps best characterized as a certain kind of *strategy* in philosophy. This strategy can be traced at least as far back as George Berkeley's idealism. Although Berkeley's idealist project is most popularly understood as primarily a metaphysical thesis, his idealism is just as much (if not more) an account of *meaning*. Thus, while Berkeley is most often associated with his metaphysical 'esse est percipi' principle, I claim that his instruction to, "think with the learned and speak with the vulgar,"<sup>34</sup> is just as fundamental. So what exactly is this crucial strategy within Berkeley's idealism? It is to claim that the proper meaning of our everyday language regarding the physical world is best understood in terms of our own perception (or ideas, as Berkeley puts it). In this way, Berkeley is 'deflating' a portion of discourse by arguing that it is not as metaphysically robust as some characterize it. Thus, we may speak with the

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<sup>33</sup> James Dreier, "Meta-ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism," *Philosophical Perspectives* (2004).

<sup>34</sup> Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, (PHK, 51).

vulgar in our everyday discourse about the physical world, as long as we think with the learned and acknowledge the idealist meaning of this language.

Hume seems to take a similar deflationary strategy in his discussion of causation, so perhaps it is not surprising that it crops up again in the next major empiricist movement – logical positivism.<sup>35</sup> In this case, the logical positivists were more explicit than Berkeley or Hume that they were dealing with issues of meaning (primarily concerning theoretical terms within scientific language), but the same basic strategy is evident. According to positivists, when scientists talk about theoretical entities like electrons, they are not making metaphysical claims about unobservable particles, but simply using the term as a sort of shorthand for a number of related observations and axioms within a given theory. Thus, the infamous verificationist theory of meaning can be understood as another instance of a similar deflationary strategy. Indeed, if you push positivists to answer whether electrons are real, some will even say yes; as long as ‘real’ is understood properly i.e. in a deflationary sense.<sup>36</sup>

It should be no surprise that the expressivist quasi-realist package inherits some of these deflationary strategies from logical positivism, given that early expressivists were *themselves* positivists.<sup>37</sup> The plainest example of this is A.J. Ayer, whose own deflationary theory of truth anticipated much more modern versions (including those that some expressivists now employ). Indeed, as Dreier points out, Ayer’s deflationary strategy towards the concept of truth can be seen as the inspiration for how later expressivists would deal with the concept of ‘the good’.<sup>38</sup> In both cases, the relevant predicate or concept is explained in terms of what people do with it, and

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<sup>35</sup> Ayer makes this point about Hume in *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936).

<sup>36</sup> See Schlick, *Positivism and Realism* (1933).

<sup>37</sup> Early expressivism is often referred to as ‘emotivism’. Although there are important differences between expressivism and emotivism, the former is certainly a direct descendent of the latter, and they share the same basic strategy.

<sup>38</sup> Dreier, 23-44.

not by reference to some mind-independent property or fact. Thus, although we are invited to talk about truth and the good all we want, the tradition of minimalism reminds us that this is only ‘vulgar talk’ in place of the real meaning or function of this kind of language.

My argument in the remainder of the paper is that the minimalist approach to metaethics is deeply problematic for two reasons. First, it cannot adequately account for the nature of the language it attempts to deflate. Secondly, it obscures what is fundamentally at stake in metaethics. Fortunately, however, there are much *better* ways to try to capture the aims of quasi-realism, such that those who are sympathetic to the project are better served looking elsewhere. I will first detail the two problems afflicting minimalism, and then outline a more promising alternatives to quasi-realism within metaethics, which shares the same basic ambitions.

The first problem is really the one that I’ve been discussing in relation to Gibbard and Blackburn’s quasi-realism. Both Gibbard and Blackburn deflate realist moral language into expressions of certain attitudes – either particular types of plans or second-order attitudes. This represents the aforementioned attempt to have one’s cake and eat it too, and I’ve argued that it builds a critical tension into the quasi-realist strategy. In fact, I think many other minimalist strategies confront a similar dilemma as quasi-realism. The predicament is essentially that when one deflates a certain area of discourse, a decision must be made about how to handle language that seems *explicitly* inflated. For the expressivist quasi-realist project, the relevant inflated language is realist moral language; and the issue is that if expressivism tells us that moral language should be understood in terms of the expression of certain attitudes – and *not* descriptions of properties or facts in the world – then how can one make sense of realist statements that seem explicitly descriptive or factual. For instance, how can expressivism make sense of a statement like, ‘it’s a mind-independent fact that stealing for fun is wrong’?

One way to handle this kind of language would be some sort of eliminativism. Thus, the expressivist could simply argue that explicitly realist language is either false, or somehow meaningless or confused. However, this is obviously not how Gibbard and Blackburn decide to deal with realist language – and for seemingly good reason. At least in the case of metaethics, many of us have strong *prima facie* intuitions that certain realist claims should be somehow vindicated. Furthermore, there is always the worry for expressivism that their account will collapse into some sort of subjectivism, whereupon the wrongness of an act is simply dependent on one’s attitude towards it. For these reasons, the quasi-realist program attempts to accommodate these seemingly incongruous statements within an expressivist framework. However, I’ve argued that this puts irresolvable strain on the project. Either the quasi-realist fails in capturing this realist discourse, or makes commitments that leave it susceptible to the exact challenges the minimalist strategy supposedly avoids.

The second problem with the minimalist strategy in metaethics is one that I’ve not discussed so far. For the purposes of my earlier argument against quasi-realism, I assumed that there is a clear enough distinction between quasi-realism and ordinary realism. Indeed, the conclusion that any successful expressivist quasi-realist project will take on the challenges of ordinary realism would be trivial if it turns out that the two positions turn out to be identical. However, it is actually rather controversial whether the expressivist quasi-realist project *can* clearly distinguish itself from ordinary realism, or adequately articulate a distinct position. In particular, Dreier notes a meta-philosophical movement within expressivist quasi-realism he terms ‘creeping minimalism’, which threatens to make such a distinction very difficult to draw.

In explaining this movement within quasi-realism, Dreier discusses what he calls ‘the Good Old Days’ of metaethics. In the Good Old Days, it was very clear how to differentiate the

three main metaethical positions: realism, anti-realism, and irrealism. Essentially, realists and anti-realists agreed that moral language is cognitive, expressing propositions; but anti-realists like Mackie claimed that all such propositions were false. On the other hand, irrealists like Ayer disagreed with both realists *and* anti-realists about the nature of moral language – arguing that it is not propositional, and instead expresses certain non-cognitive attitudes. In this way, the distinguishing feature of irrealism was its denial of bivalence, because moral language according to early anti-realists is not truth-apt.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, the creeping minimalism that Dreier discusses in the context of the expressivist quasi-realist project is actually part of two distinct, but interrelated trends within the project; both of which contribute to the decline of the clarity that defined the Good Old Days: First, there is the trend of what Dreier terms ‘accommodation’. This is essentially the attempt by expressivists to accommodate language and concepts typically thought to belong to realists (or cognitivists). Secondly, in order to provide this kind of accommodation, expressivists increasingly rely on minimalist accounts of these concepts or language domains; like truth, facts, and properties. There are differing minimalist approaches, but as explained before, the general strategy is to explain talk of truth or facts in ways that avoid supposedly problematic metaphysical commitments – this is essentially the quasi-realist project. Dreier’s fundamental point is that once one starts trending in the minimalist direction, it is natural to understand all types of concepts in this way; and at some point this can make it very hard to explicate what is the difference between ‘inflated’ realists and minimalist irrealists. This is creeping minimalism.<sup>40</sup>

In this paper, I have focused on Gibbard and Blackburn – both of which have minimalist elements as part of their quasi-realist project. However, it is important to note that the minimalist

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<sup>39</sup> Dreier, 23-5.

<sup>40</sup> Dreier, 25-6.

strategy ‘creeps’ even farther. For instance, Mark Timmons and Terry Horgan advocate a position called ‘cognitivist expressivism’, which claims that moral statements can even be understood as expressing *beliefs*, as long as this is understood in some deflated sense.<sup>41</sup>

Hopefully, it is evident how his trend of creeping might trouble those who want to say that there is a difference between realism and irrealism. I join Dreier in this camp, but I’m less optimistic that we can make such a clear distinction once minimalism spreads within the expressivist project.

One of the most promising strategies to make such a distinction in the age of creeping minimalism is offered by Kit Fine.<sup>42</sup> Although Fine’s work concerns the problem of minimalism in philosophy more generally, his discussion of it in the context of metaethics is worth considering. Moreover, Fine’s project is very influential in how Dreier approaches the problem. The basic insight is that if we embed normative statements into *non*-normative statements – so-called ‘protected normative statements’ – we might be able to tease out the difference we are looking for between realists and irrealists. For instance, consider the following example from Dreier:

(E) Edith said that abortion is wrong.

Both the realist and irrealist will agree that this is a factual statement, capable of being true or false. But now we can ask the irrealist to fill in *this* statement:

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

The hope is that however the irrealist chooses to fill in the blank, it will differ in some crucial way from how the realist would. By using this method, we are looking for the most fundamental

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Timmons, *Moralist Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Kit Fine, “The Question of Realism,” *Philosophers Imprint* (2001), 1-30.

explanation an account might give of what is going on when we use normative language – what Fine calls a ‘statement of ground’.<sup>43</sup>

According to Dreier, when irrealists are forced to fill in such blanks, they will appeal to a certain functional account of normative language that is fundamentally different from realism:

The point, I think, is that expressivists are distinguished by their claim that there is nothing to making a normative judgment over and above being in a state that plays a certain “non-cognitive” psychological role, a role more like desire than it is like factual belief. In particular, to explain what it is to make a moral judgment, we need not mention any normative properties.<sup>44</sup>

It is precisely this lack of reference to normative properties in a full explanation of normative judgments that Dreier sees as essential to maintaining the distinction between realism and irrealism.

However, despite the initial promise, there are a number of problems with this strategy. The first, which Dreier himself notes, is that the ‘consists of nothing more than’ relation that underwrites the strategy is rather vague. Fine seems to be looking for the most basic explanation of what (E) holds in *virtue of*, but it is hard to see why a minimalist might not just substitute (E) right into (G) to serve as an explanation. Dreier says we must not let such ‘lazy theorists’ get away with that kind of deflationary move, but it is hard to see why such a route is not available once minimalism starts creeping. Perhaps someone like Gibbard might fill in (G) with a story about planning, but a more thoroughgoing minimalist might not cooperate with Fine’s strategy in this way.

However, the more central problem is that it is not clear why someone like Horgan or Timmons would not fill in (G) with an explanation that includes both beliefs and properties, understood in the minimalist sense. Once again, although *Gibbard* might not reference normative

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<sup>43</sup> Dreier, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Dreier, 39.

properties in his explanation of our normative judgments, we have seen that others have taken the minimalist strategy much further; accommodating notions like beliefs and properties into *their* explanation. Because our concern is with how to maintain a distinction between realism and irrealism in the context of creeping minimalism, it is not clear that Fine's strategy helps once we admit that the creeping effect can consume many of the concepts previously thought to keep the two metaethical projects apart. Indeed, this just *is* the problem of creeping minimalism. Thus, even with these protected statements, it seems optimistic to think that these fundamental explanations will be able to differentiate irrealism and realism as minimalism continues to spread within expressivism.

Finally, even if Dreier and Fine are right – and there is some way to ultimately distinguish realism and irrealism – I hope it is at least clear that the minimalist strategy greatly obscures what exactly is at stake. The early expressivist project had certain clear metaethical implications: normative statements are not truth-apt; explicitly realist moral language is false etc. These are substantive metaethical positions that can be debated. However, once this expressivist project was combined with the quasi-realist program, accommodation and creeping minimalism began to shift the focus. Instead of concentrating on these central issues, more of the emphasis became about how to explain certain notions, like truth, in terms that could allow expressivists to be able to say the same kind of things as ordinary realists. But surely there is more to metaethics than earning the right to *say* certain things? My contention is that quasi-realism takes expressivism in the wrong direction. If expressivism wants to continue as a legitimate metaethical position distinct from realism, it would do best to stay away from expanding the minimalist strategy.

## VIII. ALTERNATE DIRECTIONS

The final point I want to make is that, given the problems associated with expressivist quasi-realism,<sup>45</sup> there seem to be much better ways to try to make good on the central ambitions of the program.<sup>46</sup> Recall that these ambitions are essentially two-fold – to be able to affirm the mind-independency of value, while retaining a naturalistic metaphysical picture. These are certainly noble ends in my opinion, but this is precisely why cognitivists of all stripes *also* have the same objective. If some of these cognitivist projects can offer the same rewards as expressivist quasi-realism, with fewer challenges and simpler explanations, the initial draw away from cognitivism appears diminished.

For example, naturalist realists by definition are attempting to reconcile naturalism and objectivity. Furthermore, if the expressivist quasi-realist argues that such reductive projects cannot account for the distinctive nature of normative language and thought, there are always non-reductive versions that make similar claims as expressivists about the special role of normativity. Gibbard actually admits that G.E. Moore's project was a major inspiration for his own metaethical theory; and although Moore is often considered a non-naturalist realist, a more plausible reading is as a sort of non-*reductivist* about normative concepts. However, in this case, if one is attracted to this kind of non-reductive approach, it is hard to see what the expressivist quasi-realist strategy offers. Gibbard admits that the two views share much in common, but expressivist quasi-realism comes with much more baggage.

There is also an entire constructivist tradition in metaethics, which has several strands that might appeal to those sympathetic to the aims of expressivist quasi-realist project. For instance, various forms of Kantian constructivism seem to have the same ambition to give a

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<sup>45</sup> In particular, expressivism is noted for having a number of semantic challenges, most notably the 'Frege-Geach Problem'.

<sup>46</sup> Street makes a similar point, and argues that her own metaethical position should be preferred.

naturalist explanation of morality that still allows for a kind of objectivity. According to such an account, some sort of practical perspective and/or process fixes the norms of morality. In turn, this perspective is constrained by rationality, and this constraint is supposed to generate norms that are properly objective and authoritative. In this way, there is nothing metaphysically mysterious about the source of normativity, or at least nothing non-naturalistic. Moreover, the nature of this source as grounded in a shared feature of agency is properly mind-independent.

All this is not to say that these alternative strategies don't have their own problems and objections, but they offer a much more straightforward and plausible explanation of the source and nature of normativity than the expressivist quasi-realist project. Moreover, they don't rely on minimalist explanations of key concepts that are both inadequate and obfuscating. Indeed, the further minimalism continues to creep within the expressivist project, the less expressivism represents an attractive alternative to cognitivist metaethical positions. In this way, although quasi-realism was meant to allow the expressivist to have one's cake and eat it too, it instead weighs it down; and seemingly cancels out any advantage it might have originally enjoyed over cognitivism. My final suggestion, then, is that expressivism retreats and reorganizes. Instead of continuing to focus on ways to say the same kinds of things as realists, expressivism should focus on the challenges it faces apart from quasi-realism, and make a more convincing argument for an expressivist account of normative language. If this means that expressivists are not able to make the same claims to objectivity as realists, then perhaps more should be done to convince that this is a faulty aim. Regardless, quasi-realism is not the answer to expressivism's problems.

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