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Varieties of Objectivity: What's Worth Keeping?

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses the problem of whether or not morality can be objective. Objectivity seems built into our everyday moral discourse and practice, yet it can be difficult to say just what moral objectivity consists in. There is significant disagreement in the philosophical literature on this topic. I examine three influential contemporary accounts of objectivity: Derek Parfit's non-naturalist realism, Sharon Street's anti-realist constructivism, and Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons' cognitivist expressivism. Despite their differences, these authors share a common aim: to defend the idea that the truth of moral claims are at least in some sense invariant with respect to our subjective attitudes about morality.

I argue that each view faces significant challenges and that none of the three offers a convincing account of moral objectivity. Parfit's proposed epistemology is problematic, in particular the role he gives to rational intuition of self-evident truths. Street's view of personal values as the source of moral truth does not adequately account for the authority of moral claims, and has a number of unappealing consequences. Horgan and Timmons' minimalist view of truth is unconvincing and leaves their account vulnerable to charges of moral relativism. Nonetheless, each view also has something important to offer. I propose that a successful account of moral objectivity will need to take seriously Parfit's idea that the source of reasons must be external to individuals, Street's conviction that moral truths must not involve a mysterious epistemology or be too removed from the practical standpoint, and Horgan and Timmons' idea that evaluative beliefs are unique and may require new ways of thinking about moral truth and cognitive content. I also note that reasons play a key role in all three accounts of objectivity, but that all three views also make moral reasoning and judgement a bit mysterious. I conclude that more work needs to be done on the nature of reasons and their relation to moral truth.

Keywords

Moral objectivity, realism, constructivism, cognitivist expressivism, reasons, intuition, personal values, personal standpoint, moral phenomenology, moral contextualism, minimalism, self-evident, truth, metaethics.

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1 Introduction: varieties of objectivity

Everyday moral discourse and practice seem to presuppose that morality is in some sense objective. Objectivity seems to be built into our moral language, and our interpretation of moral claims. When we denounce the frequent killing of black people by police as wrong and claim that “black lives matter,” we don't mean simply that we like black people or that black lives happen to matter to us personally. We mean that black lives matter morally and that everyone has a reason to treat them in a certain way regardless of their subjective attitudes. We mean that black people have the same status that other human beings possess, and deserve to have their rights protected just as much as any other human being. In this way, our moral way of speaking implies that morality is not a subjective matter, and moral claims are not just claims about what each one of us happens to feel or prefer.

Objectivity is also built into the way that we approach moral debate and disagreement: we argue about whether a moral claim is true or false, right or wrong, which implies that we think there is a moral fact of the matter. We try to persuade others to think and act differently when we think they are wrong; unlike in matters of personal taste, we try to change each other's minds, and take the time to provide reasons. Moral disagreements are so significant that we are sometimes willing to stake our lives or at least our well-being on them; those who fought to end slavery or promote civil rights for African-Americans were willing to endure significant hardships to convince others of the wrongness of treating one group of people as less than others. Even the idea that an act can *be* right or wrong, a moral claim true or false, seems to presuppose some standard other than personal opinion that makes moral claims right or wrong. There would be no point in debating about moral views if we didn't think it was possible to arrive at a correct or better point of view, or if each of our preferences or opinion was all there was to moral truth.

Finally, we also experience morality as objective; it doesn't feel like moral obligations are simply personal preferences or arbitrary, rather we experience them as having an authority that comes from outside of ourselves, not only from our personal preferences. When we cringe at witnessing an act of cruelty, it doesn't feel like the reason we cringe is only that we happen to have a soft heart; it seems like there are features of cruel actions that make it wrong, regardless of whether the observer happens to find it offensive. It wouldn't seem right to think, "Oh well, that cruel act bothers me, but maybe it's not wrong for that person." We walk away and feel badly for the child whose parent was berating them, and we want the parent to stop not because of how we feel, but because it seems wrong for anyone to be spoken to in that manner. We also experience guilt and shame when we fail to live up to our moral views in a way that we do not feel guilt when we make a mistake of etiquette, such as wearing stained clothing to work. Moral mistakes feel much weightier than mistakes of etiquette or custom. Together, these aspects of moral discourse, practice, and phenomenal experience demonstrate what Gibbard has famously called the "objective pretensions" of morality.¹ Whatever moral truth and objectivity is, our everyday moral thought and practice appears to presume and depend upon it.

But is there really any objective moral truth? People disagree widely about what is morally right and wrong, and it can be difficult to say what makes one view more plausible than another. The fact that there is a fair amount of disagreement over moral matters might suggest that there isn't really any truth; if there were, why does it seem so difficult to find it? Why do our views vary so widely, so that some of us think that practices like female genital mutilation are abhorrent, and others think it is obligatory? Perhaps our everyday moral discourse and practice is premised on widespread error and wishful thinking, and moral truth is relative to place and culture. John Mackie has famously argued along these lines, claiming that while our moral language assumes

1 *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 1990. See Timmons 1999: 74-76 for a discussion of the way our common moral discourse reflects these objective pretensions. A related view is that of Richard Joyce, who fills out this story by providing an evolutionary argument for why our moral discourse and practice treats morality as objective: we are simply projecting moral truth onto whatever has been reproductively advantageous (*The Evolution of Morality*, 2006).

objective moral truths of the kind that non-naturalist realism posits, the kind of objective properties which would be needed to make such truths intrinsically action-guiding would be too metaphysically “queer” or mysterious to be plausible, and would require an equally mysterious epistemology.² He concludes that although our common moral thought and practice assumes objective moral facts of the type realists posit, we are all making a massive error. Yet this conclusion would have troubling implications and doesn't seem to fit our experience, either; it would leave us with little to say to those who we disagree with morally, and would make it hard to know how to make choices about what to do. And it seems that until and unless we have some way of knowing when a moral claim is true or false, it will be hard to sort out moral disagreements successfully. As Thomas Nagel puts it, “objectivity is the central problem of ethics. Not just in theory, but in life” (1989:138). We want to do the right thing, and we have to make choices that have significant consequences for our own lives and the lives of others. It seems important to figure out what truth and objectivity could look like when it comes to morality.

Perhaps we can start by asking, what could it mean for a moral claim to be “objectively” true or false? What is the concept of objectivity we have in mind? There are two dominant conceptions of objectivity appealed to in the literature on metaethics: the ontological conception, and the epistemological conception.³ The ontological conception of objectivity holds that, just as there are physical objects and properties that exist apart from human perception, so there are moral properties that have an existence that does not depend on human perception. There are a number of ways in which this independence is explained. One is to say that moral properties or facts are not constituted by our reaction to them, which is Michael Huemer's view. To explain what this idea of constitution might mean, he begins by contrasting a *subjective* property with an *objective* one. For a feature

2 *Inventing Right and Wrong*, p.38, 40.

3 The epistemological conception of objectivity is also sometimes referred to as a “rationalist” conception; see for example Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons (2008: 270). I will use the term “epistemological” because it is more commonly used in metaethical literature. These two broad conceptions of objectivity are also outlined by Gideon Rosen (“Objectivity and Modern Idealism: What is the Question?”1994) and R.W. Newell (*Objectivity, Empiricism, and Truth*). The ontological conception of objectivity is also sometimes referred to as the metaphysical conception (Rosen 285).

to be “in the subject” means that that feature “constitutively depends at least in part on the psychological attitude or response” of observers (2005:2). For example, things like *funniness* or *sexiness* are subjective because whether or not something is funny or someone is sexy depends on whether others find them so. In this case, funniness and sexiness “constitutively depend” on people's responses because these responses are part of what we take “funny” or “sexy” to mean.

By contrast, a feature such as *squareness* is objective because whether or not an object is square has nothing to do with an observer's reaction to it. The concept of squareness is not constituted by any person's reaction, but by a particular shape that is defined as square. Huemer proposes that moral objectivity is more like squareness than funniness: there are objective values that we (sometimes) correctly identify, and these have nothing to do with our own reactions or subjective states. Thus when a moral statement is objectively true, what makes it true is “not even partly the attitudes or psychological reactions of observers towards the things the statement is about” (5)⁴.

Another way to explain ontological objectivity is that moral properties and facts are “mind-independent.” This is Derek Parfit's view, and he explains it this way: there are some abstract entities and properties that are not dependent on our mind in the sense that they are not created by us. For example, while novelists invent fictional characters, “mathematicians and scientists *discover* proofs and laws of nature” (2011: Vol 2, 475). Parfit thinks normative truths are more like scientific or mathematic than like fictional characters: they are there to be discovered by us, and their existence does not depend on anything about our mental states. And since these truths do not depend on our subjective mental states, they give us objective reasons to do or refrain from doing things, reasons that in no way depend upon our desires or subjective attitudes more generally. For

4 Ronald Dworkin (1996) and Gideon Rosen (1994) hold similar views. Dworkin claims that when we use adverbs like “really” or “objectively” in moral contexts, we mean that there are reasons in support of moral claims that “in no way depend on my or anyone else's personal reactions or tastes” (98), and that our judgement that genocide in Bosnia is wicked is an opinion about the “actual moral character” of genocide, a matter of “how things really are” (92). Similarly, Rosen argues that “when all goes well, inquiry in the disputed area discovers what is already there...successful thought amounts to the detection of something real, as opposed to a projection onto the real of our own peculiar or subjective perspective” (278).

example, the fact that smoking is likely to shorten our lifespan gives us a reason not to smoke, regardless of our individual desires; even if for some reason we didn't care about living a long life, Parfit claims that the objective facts about smoking (that it causes cancer) give all of us a reason to avoid it (2011, Vol.1: 46-75). Shafer-Landau holds a similar view, but prefers to explain objectivity in terms of “stance-independence” (2003). He argues that moral truth is conceptually and existentially independent of human perceptions or agreements about those truths; a moral standard might be correct even if no one happens to know about it or think it correct (17). This is because on Shafer-Landau's view “the moral standards that fix the moral facts are not made true by virtue of their ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective” or stance (2003:15). Another way to put this idea is that the truth of any first-order normative claim is not a function of what anyone happens to think of it; it doesn't become true because it goes through a particular process or comes from a particular point of view. To sum up, the ontological conception of moral objectivity holds that moral truth is set not by the mental states or stance of those making moral claims, but by moral facts that exist apart from human perception and that our moral vocabulary describes.

In contrast, the epistemological conception of objectivity holds that objectivity is determined by a particular way in which we come to know moral truth, a certain method of thinking or reasoning. On this view, objectivity is a feature of the right methods of inquiry: “we call an inquiry 'objective' when its trajectory is unaffected in relevant ways by the peculiar biases, preferences, ideological commitments, prejudices, personal loyalties, ambitions, and the like of the people who conduct it” (Rosen, 1994:283). Constructivists such as Christine Korsgaard, Sharon Street, and Thomas Scanlon appeal to some version of the epistemological conception of objectivity. They claim that moral facts are the outcome of a particular constructive process, and that moral claims are objectively true when they describe these facts.⁵ For example, on Scanlon's view, if an

5 For example, Sharon Street argues that moral truth is the outcome of the process of considering all of one's normative commitments in reflective equilibrium, which will entail what a person ought to do (2008). Christine Korsgaard argues that the process of reflective endorsement and self-legislation yield normativity (1996). Thomas Scanlon proposes that it is our contracting with others to follow principles that no one could reasonably reject that provide a basis for normativity (1998). His contractualism

action would be disallowed by a set of principles that no one could reasonably reject, then it is wrong (1998:153). The procedure of discovering or arriving at moral truth that he outlines is objective in the sense that each person cannot simply follow their own subjective desires but must act in accordance with the principles that others could not reasonably reject. Objectivity on the epistemological view is thus not about discovering objective moral properties in the world, but about an epistemologically trustworthy process that yields moral truth.

Sometimes expressivists also appeal to a particular way of reasoning in defining objectivity. For example, Simon Blackburn proposes that moral claims are best understood not as descriptions of moral facts but as expressions of attitudes such as endorsing or disavowing a particular course of action, attitudes which we project onto the world and then read back as fact.⁶ Since these attitudes can be misinformed or warped by bias, he proposes that a moral claim is objective when the person making the claim is “sensitive to the right aspects of the situation, and in the right way” (Blackburn, 1999:221). Objectivity is thus a quality of the process of gaining knowledge, not a property of a fact that can be discovered along with other kinds of facts. Where the ontological conception of objectivity places special normative objects (i.e. moral facts or reasons) at the centre of inquiry, the epistemological conception of objectivity focuses on the process or method used to arrive at moral judgements. For example, Thomas Nagel proposes that “objectivity is a method of understanding” in which we “step back from our initial view of [some aspect of life or the world] and form a new conception” that is more objective in that it transcends our individual, personal point of view (1989: 4-7). Nagel is neither a constructivist nor an expressivist, but also appeals to an epistemological conception of objectivity because he thinks that moral objectivity is characterized by adopting an objective, impersonal standpoint and bringing this standpoint to bear on the

defends an epistemological view of objectivity yet is realist about reasons and thus appears to defend a version of non-naturalism (2014).

6 Blackburn, 1993, 1998.

moral decisions and considerations we are concerned with (138-143).⁷ The epistemological conception of objectivity therefore puts the emphasis on the method of acquiring moral knowledge, and not on moral objects or facts which our claims (supposedly) refer to or pick out.

What are we to make of these approaches to objectivity; is one better than the other, and worth keeping? The purpose of this thesis is to examine three differing, influential contemporary approaches to moral objectivity (one that appeals to each of the above conceptions of objectivity, and one view that introduces a new, third conception of objectivity that I outline below) and to argue that none of them is entirely worth keeping. The first chapter examines Derek Parfit's non-naturalist realism, the second chapter Sharon Street's anti-realist version of constructivism, and the third, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons' cognitivist expressivism. I've chosen these views for three reasons. First, they represent three of the dominant approaches to objectivity in the metaethical literature,⁸ which makes them important to evaluate if one hopes to understand the state of the debate over objectivity. Second, I think they are good test-cases to reveal the challenges that other similar views are likely to face. A careful examination of where and why they face challenges can thus be helpful in locating weaknesses in similar views and knowing which issues are crucial to address. Third, clarifying where each view fails also points to desiderata that a successful view of objectivity will need to include, which can aid in further theorizing about objectivity. Thus while these three views are certainly not representative nor exhaustive of all of the metaethical options when it comes to thinking about moral objectivity, they nonetheless provide a solid starting point for taking stock of

7 See also Newell's claim that what is distinctive about the epistemological conception of objectivity is that "objectivity attaches to *persons* through their actions" so that "what makes a judgement objective is not something special about outer objects, but something special about people's practices" (1986:17).

8 A fourth popular approach to objectivity that I don't address in this dissertation comes from naturalist versions of realism, which claim that moral facts are a kind of natural fact. Examples are Philippa Foot's neo-Aristotelian realism according to which goodness is defined as that which conduces to flourishing (2001), and David Copp's view that moral truth is determined by the moral codes that would best enable society to meet its needs for peaceful and cooperative behaviour (2008). I've chosen not to examine a naturalist realist view primarily for scope considerations, and because I think naturalist views face significant enough challenges to prevent them from providing a viable alternative. I say more along these lines in the concluding chapter.

this debate and knowing where work is needed in order to make progress. I therefore see my project as providing both a clear diagnosis of where a number of dominant views go wrong, and an indication of where the debate might benefit from going next.

Each of the three views I consider has a common aim: to defend the idea that the truth of moral claims are at least in some sense invariant with respect to our subjective attitudes about morality. In other words, all share the conviction that moral claims are not simply true because the person making them thinks they are true; moral truth is more than whatever each of us happens to think is right in a given moment. However, these three authors disagree significantly in their understanding and defense of what makes the truth of moral claims invariant. Parfit endorses a (roughly) ontological conception of moral objectivity according to which moral truth is invariant because there are objective non-natural moral facts which our moral claims (when they are right) correctly describe.⁹ Street endorses an epistemological conception of objectivity, according to which moral truth is invariant with respect to our subjective attitudes (at least on any particular occasion) to the extent that it is consistent with the rest of a person's own value system. Horgan and Timmons endorse a view not previously introduced in the literature, loosely described as a phenomenological conception of objectivity. According to this view, moral claims are objective because of certain phenomenological features: we experience them as binding irrespective of our desires, and we defend them by giving impartial and nonarbitrary reasons. In each chapter, I explain the author's view of moral objectivity, and raise some concerns. I also address two issues in each chapter: first, I consider how well each view accords with everyday moral discourse and practice, and what we might learn from this. Second, I note where the authors seek to downplay the difficulty with key parts of each of their views, and argue that there is something a little mysterious that is left unexplained in each. The outline of each chapter of my thesis is as follows.

9 I say “roughly” because an important clarification is in order: Parfit argues that normative truths do not have ontological status, because he doesn't think it's a clear enough question whether some abstract entities such as moral truths or mathematical truths exist in any ontological sense (2011: Vol.2, 480-483). However, since he thinks that there are moral truths whose existence we discover rather than create, and which are not the outcome of any particular idealized process of discovery, his view fits within the ontological conception of objectivity outlined above.

In the first chapter, I present Parfit's view of objectivity. Parfit defends the objectivity of ethics by appealing to self-evident normative truths. He argues that facts such as that someone is in pain give us objective reasons to act. These reasons are objective because they do not depend on our subjective desires or aims but on facts about pain itself, so that we have a reason to avoid being in pain regardless of whether or not we happen to care about being in pain. His view endorses an ontological view of objectivity in that he thinks moral facts have existence apart from our perception or mental states such as desires. He argues that fundamental normative truths like the badness of pain are self-evident, and that we can come to know them through rational intuition, much like we come to know mathematical or logical truths. Thus moral judgements based on self-evident truths are central to Parfit's defence of moral objectivity: they are what ultimately give us reason to act. I've chosen to examine Parfit's view because while non-naturalist versions of realism fell out of favour early in the 20th century, there has been renewed interest in these views in recent years¹⁰ and Parfit's view in particular has received significant attention.¹¹ Since his view is seen to provide a definitive advance in the defense of objectivity from a non-naturalist realist point of view, it is an important view to consider.¹²

In evaluating Parfit's view, I argue that he employs a "quietist" approach to key metaphysical and epistemological aspects of his view and that this strategy is problematic.¹³ First, he downplays the difficulty in knowing which natural facts give us

¹⁰ In addition to Parfit, Michael Huemer (2005) and Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) have recently defended versions of non-naturalist realism.

¹¹ The seriousness with which the philosophical community is taking Parfit's work can be seen in the soon-to-be-published collection of essays from a number of prominent philosophers who examine Parfit's view of objectivity, edited by Peter Singer (*Does Anything Really Matter? Parfit on Objectivity*, Forthcoming November 2016).

¹² For example, in Peter Singer's review of Parfit's *On What Matters*, he claims that this book is a "major philosophical event" that has "for the first time in decades, put those who reject objectivism in ethics on the defensive," and that from Parfit we gain the possibility of defending moral objectivity (2011).

¹³ Most broadly, quietism is a rejection of theorizing or constructive arguments as a way of addressing philosophical problems, and often involves refusing to provide a straight answer to a philosophical problem (Macarthur 2008:7, Price 2011: 249-252, and Rosen 1994). I give more detail about quietism in the next chapter.

reasons as well as the central role of value judgements in determining what we have reason to do. He explains which natural facts give us reasons in terms of valuable outcomes, but then defines valuable outcomes in terms of reason-giving natural facts. The result is that the relationship between natural facts, values, and reasons remains somewhat mysterious his view. Second, Parfit's efforts to quieten worries about his epistemology are unsuccessful. He draws on an analogy between the epistemology used in mathematics and normative matters to help explain how we might know moral claims, but the analogy is unhelpful because the nature of claims made in these domains is too different to gain much from comparing them. Rational intuition is also a more problematic epistemology than Parfit lets on. Since intuitions are often conflicting and may reflect unconscious biases, even claims that seem to us self-evidently true may not be. This suggests that intuition is only a partially reliable way of knowing moral truth. I propose that intuition is better thought of as a starting place for moral deliberation rather than a “trump card” that ends the discussion, since we can and must scrutinize the content of our moral intuitions and defend them by giving reasons. I conclude by suggesting that since we must defend our intuitions by giving reasons in support of them, intuition cannot play the central role in moral objectivity that Parfit implies.

In the second chapter, I examine Sharon Street's constructivism. Her view is premised on a rejection of non-naturalist realism, which she argues is impugned by an evolutionary debunking argument. She claims that realists of this sort must be able to account for the pervasive influence of selective pressures on the content of our evaluative judgements, and that they face a dilemma in doing so: if they hold, on the one hand, that selective pressures have led us to “track” normative truth, their account is unacceptable on scientific grounds. This is because there are other, better scientific explanations of why some of our evaluative judgements are selectively advantageous, and because it is unclear how we might have evolved to track non-natural truths when they have no causal powers. If, on the other hand, realists claim that selective pressures have not led us to track normative truth, their view leads to the skeptical conclusion that most of our judgements are likely to be unjustified due to the distorting influence of evolutionary pressures. Street concludes that either way, realist views have no convincing way to

account for the influence of Darwinian forces on the content of human evaluative judgements.

As an alternative, Street proposes a constructivist view on which normative truth consists in what is entailed from within each individual's practical point of view. She thinks it is clear that evolutionary pressures have influenced our normative judgements, but rather than claiming that such judgements track attitude-independent truths, she proposes that normative truth is simply a function of the evaluative judgements that these pressures have led us to make. That is, values are not discovered; instead, we create in the act of valuing. One's own values are thus the source of moral truth and reason for action. Street further claims that while there are no normative truths that hold independently of our evaluative attitudes, it is still possible to be in error about our normative judgements because they give us the standards for error: we go wrong when we act inconsistently with our own values. In other words, we can be objectively wrong because the choices we make in any given moment may not reflect or be in line with our own deeply held values. Thus while the truth of moral claims is ultimately determined by our own values, moral truth is not reducible to whatever we claim in any given moment; if we act inconsistently with our values, we are acting wrongly. Street concludes that while this understanding of moral truth is less robust than realist views, it nonetheless provides all that is needed to capture our attitudes about moral truth and objectivity.

Since Street thinks that moral truth is discovered by a particular method (stepping back to consider what is consistent with our values overall rather than just in a particular moment), she endorses an epistemological conception of objectivity. However, her view preserves the weakest form of objectivity of the three I consider; while a person's moral views can be objectively wrong from a more informed, accurate view of one's own values and what they entail, moral truth is ultimately dependent on personal values on Street's view. I've chosen to examine Street's view because her view is premised on a rejection of views like Parfit's, and thus helps to identify some of the key difficulties views like his face (with regard to epistemology in particular). Her view is also worth examining because it gives a very clear picture of both the appeal of anti-realist views (namely, the

desire to have our moral theorizing harmonize with our best scientific view of the world) and the pitfalls faced by a view that makes personal values the source of normativity.

In my response to Street, I argue that her view of moral objectivity fails to accommodate common moral discourse and practice and leaves some mystery around the nature of value. The idea that personal consistency is sufficient for normative truth does not square with moral experience. Street claims that what makes a moral claim true is that it is entailed by a person's own values, so that they truly have a reason to do something only if their values entail that they do. However, the facts about a situation (especially facts about other people) are commonly taken to give everyone a reason for acting, not just those who happen to have the relevant values; when making moral claims, we do not typically think that certain facts give us reasons only if we happen to care about them. To do so would make moral claims seem contingent on individual values rather than facts that give everyone reasons, and this conflicts with the authority and respect we typically accord to moral claims. Street's view thus fails to align with central features of morality. Her view also has the unfortunate result of making moral disagreement intractable because unless we have shared values, there is little we can say to those we disagree with. On her view, moral disagreement would be reduced to figuring out what a person's current values entail instead of debating about what values to endorse. In fact, the decision of what values to endorse is left rather mysterious on Street's account; she thinks that the choice of what to value initially is not one governed by reasons, which makes the values we hold seem arbitrary. Why should we take our values so seriously, and think they give us objective reasons, when we may hold some of them for no particular reason? I conclude that Street's account of moral truth is unconvincing.

In the third chapter, I examine Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons' Cognitivist Expressivism (abbreviated as CE). Their view is premised on a rejection of the common view that moral realism provides the most straight-forward explanation for the "objective pretensions" of our everyday moral discourse and practice: that there are objective moral facts that these practices refer to. The usual conclusion drawn by defenders of moral realism is that this superior ability to make sense of everyday moral thought and practice counts in its favor. Horgan and Timmons challenge this view, arguing that closer

inspection of moral thought and practice (and moral phenomenology in particular) does not support a strong realist view in the way many suppose. They claim that moral facts as the realist construes them are problematic; for example, they argue that realists of the naturalist variety face the difficulty of picking out unique natural properties to which moral terms supposedly refer.¹⁴ They also argue that the constructivist view of moral facts is flawed because these facts are supposed to be the outcome of some ideal process of deliberation, yet such processes inevitably seem to rely on substantive assumptions about moral facts to determine what counts as an “ideal” process (2006: 227). They argue that we don't need moral facts to account for the 'objective pretensions' of morality.

As an alternative, Horgan and Timmons propose that their CE can successfully accommodate moral phenomena without reference to putative moral facts, and offer a defense of “morality without moral facts.” They begin by challenging a key assumption that they call the 'semantic assumption': that all cognitive content (i.e. belief-eligible, assertible, truth-apt content) is descriptive content, with the consequence that “all genuine beliefs and all genuine assertions purport to represent or describe the world” (2006: 256)¹⁵. This assumption has tied expressivism to noncognitivism in the past because expressivism interprets moral claims not as descriptions of moral facts, but as expressions of pro-attitudes. Thus if all cognitive content is assumed to be descriptive, expressivism is necessarily noncognitive. Horgan and Timmons argue that this assumption has been widely taken for granted in metaethics and that it is false. They claim that if this assumption is challenged, a new metaethical option opens up.

The new possibility that Horgan and Timmons argue for is that moral judgements are genuine truth-apt beliefs but that they are not descriptive. Their argument has three parts: first, they argue that since moral judgements exhibit certain generic features that are characteristic of all beliefs, they count as genuine beliefs. They take this first premise to establish that their view is cognitivist, since they think that moral beliefs are truth-apt.

14 “Morality Without Moral Facts,” in *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, ed. James Dreier. Blackwell: 2006, pgs. 220-238.

15 “Cognitivist Expressivism,” in *Metaethics after Moore*, ed. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. Oxford UP: 2006, pgs. 255-298.

Second, they propose that despite counting as genuine beliefs, moral beliefs are a unique type of belief with evaluative rather than descriptive content. This second premise clarifies the way in which their view is expressivist, since they retain the view that moral claims express attitudes whose primary intent is not to describe or represent some moral reality, but to evaluate and recommend a course of action (2006: 233). Third, they argue that their view can successfully accommodate the various common features of moral phenomenology. They argue that key features of our moral experience can account for objectivity: that we experience moral claims as grounded in reasons external to ourselves and binding irrespective of our desires, and that we experience ourselves as “coming down” on a moral matter in a non-arbitrary and non-self-privileging way. They think their view preserves a kind of “small 'o' objectivity” because it shows how the impartial, nonarbitrary reasons we give for moral claims and the authoritative role they play in moral deliberation prevent moral claims from being understood as mere expressions of personal preferences or attitudes, without recourse to the kind of objective moral facts that realists appeal to. This objectivity is “small 'o' objectivity” because it does not make any claims about an objective moral reality, yet retains the idea that the truth of moral claims is not simply reducible to personal preferences.

Since Horgan and Timmons understanding of objectivity relies heavily on our phenomenological experience of morality, their view introduces a new phenomenological conception of objectivity. I've chosen to examine their view in part because of this new way of thinking that it brings to the metaethical landscape, which I argue offers a way forward in how to think about objectivity. I've also chosen their view because expressivist views in general have had a tremendous impact on theorizing about ethics over the last half century, with philosophers like Simon Blackburn and Alan Gibbard writing extensively on metaethical issues such as truth and objectivity. As part of the expressivist tradition, their view is thus an important point of view to consider when surveying the options for thinking about objectivity. Finally, their view is worth considering because of the uniquely explicit attempt they make to challenge the assumed tight connection between expressivism and non-cognitivism. I think this aspect of their view has not received enough attention in the philosophical literature, and give reasons why I think it's important to consider.

I thus offer both a commendation and a criticism of Horgan and Timmons' view. My commendation is that the proposed authoritative role of reasons nicely captures the role reasons play in moral deliberation: when we defend the truth of our moral claims, why we think they're "really" or truly right, we appeal to reasons. This makes their proposed connection between reasons and moral objectivity promising. In particular, it offers a way of explaining the objectivity of morality without reference to non-natural moral facts, yet without reducing moral truth to whatever our personal values entail. Nonetheless, CE also faces difficulties. My criticism is that their view of truth makes it unclear how moral progress is possible; if claims about moral truth are always themselves normative claims made on the basis of nonmoral facts and the reasons we think these give us to act, this pushes the justificatory burden back onto reasons and we thus need a way of judging what count as good or authoritative reasons. The way in which reasons are authoritative remains mysterious; reasons are clearly where normativity comes in on their view, but they give little explanation of how this works. Since the authoritative role of reasons is the central issue at stake in questions about objectivity in everyday moral discourse and practice, their view cannot accommodate the phenomena in quite the way they propose. In the end, CE does not offer a satisfying account of moral objectivity.

In the concluding chapter, I step back to consider the question: of these three accounts of objectivity, is any worth keeping? The short answer is, not completely. Each faces challenges that are not easy to overcome, and each leaves a part of their view mysterious: on Parfit's view, the way in which non-moral facts give us reasons is unclear, and we are asked to believe that there is a mysterious, objective normative property that we can somehow know through rational intuition. On Street's view, our values are the source of objective reasons and normativity, yet how we come to hold the values we do and why we should be beholden to them is left rather mysterious. It appears that on her view, we adopt values for no reason at all, making our choice of values and their authority seem arbitrary. On Horgan and Timmons' view, moral claims are objective because their authority depends on non-moral facts and the reasons they give us to act, yet the way in which non-moral facts can provide moral reasons remains unexplained. I argue that each of these places of mystery is exactly where to keep looking and asking in each view; rather than skipping over these parts, we should be slowing down to clarify

and dispel the mystery. Without doing so, none of these views offers a convincing account of objectivity.

However, the longer answer to the question of what's worth keeping is that each view still offers something important to the debate over moral objectivity. From Parfit, it is worth keeping the idea that reasons must have a source external to individuals; from Street, the idea that our moral epistemology must be one that does not raise more questions than it answers, and that our view of reasons must respect the importance of the practical standpoint; and from Horgan and Timmons, it is worth keeping the idea that evaluative beliefs may be unique and require a new way of thinking about cognitive content. I suggest that a successful account of objectivity will include these three features. I also note that reasons play a key role in all three accounts of objectivity, both in how our everyday moral discourse and practice are understood as well as in our theorizing about morality, but that all three views also make moral reasoning a bit mysterious. I propose that more work needs to be done on the nature of reasons and their relation to moral truth. A plausible view of moral objectivity should expand on the nature of reasons and reason-giving, and should seek to avoid making the source of reasons too esoteric and mysterious (non-natural facts) or too limited (personal values or desires). And since morality is a highly practical endeavor, we should pay special attention to moral practice and how matters of moral truth are dealt with in everyday contexts. I propose that the reliance on reasons, and consistent theme of avoiding either appeal to intuitions alone or one's own values offers evidence that the right view may be somewhere in the middle.

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2 Parfit on moral objectivity: how do we know what really matters?

2.1 Introduction

One of the enduring challenges of moral philosophy is to say to what extent, if at all, moral claims are objectively true. Derek Parfit has recently defended the objectivity of ethics by appealing to self-evident normative truths. He argues that facts such as that someone is in pain give us objective reasons to act. These reasons are objective because they do not depend on our subjective desires or aims but on facts about pain itself, so that we have a reason to avoid being in pain regardless of whether or not we happen to care about being in pain. He further argues that fundamental normative truths like the badness of pain are self-evident, and that we can come to know them through rational intuition, much like we come to know mathematical or logical truths. Thus moral judgements based on self-evident truths are central to Parfit's defence of moral objectivity: they are what ultimately give us reason to act.

In this chapter, I raise some problems for Parfit's account of objectivity. I argue that he employs a “quietist” approach to key metaphysical and epistemological aspects of his view and that this strategy is problematic.¹⁶ First, he downplays the difficulty in knowing which natural facts give us reasons as well as the central role of value judgements in determining what we have reason to do. He explains which natural facts give us reasons in terms of valuable outcomes, but then defines valuable outcomes in terms of reason-giving natural facts. The result is that we learn little about the relationship between natural facts, values, and reasons on his view. Second, Parfit's efforts to quieten worries about his epistemology are unsuccessful. He draws on an analogy between the epistemology used in mathematics and normative matters to help explain how we might know moral claims, but the analogy is unhelpful because the nature of claims made in these domains is too different to gain much from comparing

¹⁶ The term “quietist” is used to describe attempts by some philosophers to “quiet” or minimize doubts about the metaphysical and ontological implications of their views of normativity, such as the challenge of explaining how non-natural properties fit with our broader metaphysical commitments. I explain quietist critiques in more detail in section 1.3.

them. Rational intuition is also a more problematic epistemology than Parfit lets on. Since intuitions are often conflicting and may reflect unconscious biases, even claims that seem to us self-evidently true may not be. This suggests that intuition is only a partially reliable way of knowing moral truth. Perhaps intuition is better thought of as a starting place for moral deliberation rather than a “trump card” that ends the discussion, since we can and must scrutinize the content of our moral intuitions and defend them by giving reasons. I conclude by suggesting that since we must defend our intuitions by giving reasons in support of them, moral objectivity cannot depend on intuition alone.

2.2 Self-evident truths: the foundation of objectivity

Parfit proposes that the best way to think about normativity is in the reason-involving sense: when we say that a person ought to do something, we mean that she has decisive reasons to do it (Vol.1:33, Vol.2:268).¹⁷ Objectivity enters this reason-giving view of normativity in two ways. First, facts can give us objective reasons to do something. For example, facts about the nature of pain give us objective reasons to avoid being in pain. Such reasons are objective because the facts about pain which give us a reason to avoid it do not depend on anyone's particular desires or interests. Second, a moral judgement can be objective in the sense that it can be right or wrong, by being true or false (Vol.2:413). We can know whether a moral judgement is true or false through rational intuition, and the self-evidence of some truths, such as the intrinsic badness of pain, make them particularly good candidates for knowledge in this way. Self-evident truths are thus the foundation for moral objectivity on Parfit's account in the sense that they are the truths which are most accessible through rational intuition and provide everyone a *prima facie* reason to act. I turn to examine each of these aspects of his view in more detail.

Parfit thinks that the reason-involving nature of moral normativity becomes more clear by considering the way in which reasons factor in nonmoral normativity (Vol.1:38, Vol.2:269). Beginning with nonmoral normativity, his argument proceeds as follows.

¹⁷ Parfit, Derek. 2011. *On What Matters*, Oxford University Press.

First, he claims that reasons are given by facts (Vol.1:31). The idea is fairly straight forward: facts are able to give us reasons when they count in favor of our having some attitude or acting in some way. For example, the fact that I'm allergic to apples gives me a reason not to eat them. When the facts give us stronger reasons to act in some way than in any other way, these reasons are decisive and hence normative: they tell us what we should or ought to do, believe, or feel (Vol.1: 33). While the fact that I enjoy apples and that I have an apple tree in my backyard give me reasons to eat them, these reasons are outweighed by the fact that my allergy to apples is severe. I really ought not, all things considered, to eat them.¹⁸

Second, Parfit claims that it is natural facts and not moral or normative facts which give us reasons, even when we use evaluative terms like “good” or “best” (Vol.1:39, Vol.2:280). This is because certain natural facts are what lead us to call something good or bad or best. These are typically facts about a “thing's nature, or properties, that would in certain situations give us or others strong reasons to respond to this thing in some positive way, such as wanting, choosing, using, producing, or preserving that thing” (Vol.1:38). For example, a medicine might be the best because it is the safest and most effective. If a medicine is best, this gives me a strong reason to take it. However, it is not the property of being best but the facts that make it the best (that it is the safest and most effective) that give me a reason to take the medicine.¹⁹ In this case “best” picks out the higher-level property of having other properties (given by facts about the medicine) that give us a reason to take the medicine. Thus terms like “good” or “best” do not themselves give us reasons, since their normative force derives entirely from the natural, non-normative facts which leads us to use these terms in the first place (Vol.1:39).

18 This normative reason need not be moral in nature: I may merely have prudential reasons not to eat apples if doing so makes me very ill for a few days. My normative reason not to eat apples may become a moral one if, for example, I am the sole provider for my young children, and my illness causes them to suffer as well.

19 Note that terms such as “safest” or “most effective” might also be partially normative, but the reason-giving force would not come from their normative status, just as it does not come from concepts like “good.” Instead, the reason-giving force would come from the facts that lead us to call a medicine “safest” or “most effective,” perhaps that the medicine has the least side-effects and cures illness in the shortest time.

Third, Parfit argues that it is always facts about the objects of our desires, and not simply about what would fulfill our desires, which give us decisive reasons. To explain, he identifies two contrasting views about the source of reason: *subjectivism*, the view that facts about us (our desires and preferences) are the source of reasons for action, and *objectivism*, the view that facts about the objects of our desires and aims (what we want or aim for) give us reasons. Reasons of the first type he calls subject-given, while reasons of the second type are object-given (Vol.1:45). Parfit argues in favour of an objectivist view, which he explains as follows. The type of facts about the objects of our desires which give us reasons for action are those that “make certain outcomes worth producing or preventing, or make certain things worth doing for their own sake” (Vol.1:45). For example, the fact that smoking cigarettes is likely to result in an early death and fewer years of happy life gives me a decisive reason to stop smoking (Vol.1:63). This is because the outcome of losing happy years of my life is worth preventing, so the fact that stopping smoking helps me to avoid this outcome gives me a decisive reason to quit smoking. The fact that I enjoy smoking and desire to keep doing so is outweighed by the facts that make it a less-than-worthy pursuit, such as its ill effects on health.

In addition to being object-given, Parfit further claims that all reasons for acting are also “value-based.” By “value-based” he means that the value of certain acts or outcomes, such as living a longer life, make them worth pursuing or avoiding for their own sakes, as well as often being good or bad for particular people, and thus give us reasons to act (Vol.1:45, 46). For example, the nature of agony gives us reason to want to avoid being in agony, and the nature of happiness gives us reason to want to be happy (Vol.1:56). That is, the value of the things we want determines whether or not we should pursue them. Parfit warns that using the term “value-based” is somewhat misleading, since as we saw above in the discussion of evaluative terms such as “good” or “best,” the normative force of reasons really depends on the natural facts which lead us to ascribe value to particular outcomes or actions (Vol.1:455). Nonetheless, the fact that an outcome is worthwhile or valuable is part of the explanation of how facts give us a reason to act.

By contrast, subjectivists about reasons believe that our reasons for acting are given by facts about what would fulfil or achieve our desires or aims (Vol.1: 45, 62). On

the subjectivist view, it is our desires which confer or create value: what makes an outcome worth preventing or promoting is whether or not I value or desire that outcome. This means that the strength of our reasons for acting depends on facts about our desires, such as how strong they are or whether we'd have them in ideally informed conditions, rather than on facts that make certain aims and desires worthwhile, as the objectivist holds. Parfit claims that subjectivist views cannot successfully account for our reasons for acting and are thus to be rejected as accounts of normativity as well. One of the main reasons he gives is that subjectivist claims about reasons for action are not really normative but psychological: they are not claims about what we ought to do, but claims about what we would do under certain conditions (Vol.1:61). This is because not all of our desires give us reasons; for example, desires based on false beliefs or on ignorance of the facts do not give us normative reasons to act. Since desires can be based on error, a subjectivist might claim that we should try to fulfil only those desires that we'd have were we fully informed and procedurally rational (Vol.1:61, 62). However, since what I would choose given certain conditions amounts to a psychological claim or prediction, it is hard to see why this gives me a normative reason for acting. It tells me what I am most likely to do, not what I should do. Parfit concludes that this is an implausible account of normativity, and especially of moral normativity: moral claims are not merely psychological predictions.

Turning to moral normativity, Parfit thinks that the same three claims apply to moral reasons: they are given by facts, their normative force lies in the natural or nonmoral facts on which they are based, and they are given by facts about what we desire, rather than our desires themselves. Consider the fact that (L) if I acted in various ways, I would relieve someone's pain or keep some promise. Objectivists believe the further normative fact (M) that the facts stated in (L) give us reasons to act in these ways (Vol.2:364). This is because the facts about pain and keeping promises make them worthwhile pursuits. Furthermore, these facts give us reasons regardless of our particular desires or views about the value of relieving pain or keeping a promise because the facts that make these outcomes good do not vary with individual attitudes. They are thus objective facts, independent of subjective desires or attitudes. Again, Parfit is clear that it is natural facts such as (L) and not the normative fact (M) that have normative

importance when we make normative claims (Vol.2:280). This means that the normative force in the case of (M) is found in the facts that make relieving someone's pain and keeping a promise worthwhile pursuits—not their “goodness,” but the facts that make them good things: perhaps that anyone who suffers pain wants to be rid of it, and that promise-keeping creates the trust and stability which are so integral to social well-being. However, normativity cannot be reduced to such natural facts alone, since as Parfit claims, “whenever some natural fact gives us a reason, there is also the normative fact that this natural fact gives us this reason” (Vol.2:280). Thus it is the normative property or fact that these natural facts give us reasons that is irreducibly normative and cannot be captured simply by stating the natural fact.

Anticipating worries about the metaphysical and epistemological implications involved in claiming that there are non-natural normative properties or facts, Parfit argues that there is nothing mysterious involved in his view. Addressing metaphysical worries first, he reassures the reader that normative properties and truths have no positive ontological implications. To explain, he begins by first making a distinction between mind-dependent and mind-independent abstract entities. Some abstract entities are mind-dependent, such as symphonies and literary styles: they are things whose existence depends upon, or are the products of, some people's mental lives. Other abstract entities such as mathematical proofs or scientific laws of nature are not mind-dependent or created by us, but discovered (Vol.2:474-475). He admits that “it is harder to explain what is involved in the existence of such entities or properties, and how we can know truths about them” (Vol.2:475). Nonetheless, these kinds of abstract entities clearly exist, and Parfit thinks that normative moral truths are among them. However, he claims that questions about whether and in what sense such abstract entities “really exist” are not clear enough to answer; for example, numbers seem to be the kind of thing about which it is difficult to say what it would mean for them to have fundamental ontological existence (Vol.2:476-479). Likewise, questions about what it could mean to say that normative truths exist need not be answered nor prevent us from knowing something about normativity.

In fact, claims about abstract entities can even be true without having mysterious ontological implications. Again, numbers provide a good example: it is true that $2+2=4$, and we can know this to be true without answering the question about what it means for numbers to exist in an ontological sense. Similarly, Parfit states that “there are some claims that are irreducibly normative in the reason-involving sense, and are in the strongest sense true. But these truths have no ontological implications” (Vol.2:486). One reason that such entities may not have any ontological implications, apart from the lack of clarity about what it could mean for them to exist, is that they may not have any ontological status at all; there may be more than one type of existence, so that some entities such as mathematical truths may exist non-ontologically while other things such as trees exist ontologically (Vol.2:487, 719). This means that they are not real or unreal in any relevant, ontological sense. Parfit claims that this is true of normative truths: rather than having a lesser ontological status than other truths such as empirical facts, normative properties and truths have no ontological status. Putting it all together, normative properties or truths are entities we discover rather than create, about whose existence little can or needs to be said, but which can nonetheless be “as true as any truth could be” (Vol.2:487). Just as there needn't be any mystery to explain before we can use numbers, so we needn't be burdened with the question of how normative properties can really exist, or what notion of existence is involved, in order to make normative claims.

Turning to address epistemological worries about how we might come to know these kinds of abstract entities, Parfit proposes an epistemology of rational intuition. Rational intuition describes our ability to grasp the truth of a belief simply by thinking about it, by rational reflection on the belief's content (Vol.2:489-490). It is not a mysterious kind of sense perception, but an activity analogous to the type of rational activity involved in forming true beliefs about math and logic. To explain why we don't need a special quasi-perceptual faculty to know moral truths, Parfit contrasts two ways in which we might come to know something about the world: empirical discovery of contingent truths, using the senses, or rational discovery of necessary truths, using our capacity to grasp reasons. He points out that the causal objection to non-naturalism, which claims that since non-natural properties would not have any effects we could not have any way of knowing about them, assumes the first type of knowledge: empirical

discovery through being causally affected by features of the world. He argues that the causal objection fails because moral knowledge is more like the second type of knowledge, and suggests that an analogy to math or logic helps to explain why.

The first feature that fundamental normative and mathematical or logical truths have in common is that they are necessary and not contingent (Vol.2:326, 489). This means that we don't need perceptual or causal contact with the subject matter of either in order to know something about them. In other words, we can form true mathematical beliefs without being causally affected by what those beliefs are about. For example, Parfit states that we don't need to discover that ours is a world in which we have reasons to believe some math truths such as $2+2=4$. The reason we don't need to discover this kind of information about the world through our senses is that it is not contingent on how the world happens to be; that $2+2=4$ is true in every possible world. Similarly, Parfit claims that fundamental normative truths are not contingent; for example, “in any possible world, pain would be in itself bad, and prima facie to be relieved rather than perpetuated” (Vol.2:489).²⁰ Since fundamental normative truths are not contingent, the causal objection fails: we do not need to be causally affected by normative truths any more than we do by mathematical truths in order to have knowledge of them.

The second feature that (basic, foundational) truths about morals and math or logic have in common is that they are self-evident. Self-evidence is a property of a proposition; self-evident beliefs are those whose justification does not need to be inferred from other beliefs, and thus provide sufficient evidence on their own to justify our belief in them (Vol.2:490, 509). Another way to explain self-evidence is that “if we fully understand these beliefs, we can recognize that they are, or must be, true” (Vol.2:508). For example, the truth of Modus Ponens is not one we can give helpful arguments for, but is the kind of truth that strikes us as indubitable or necessarily true when we understand its content (Vol.2:509). Similarly, Parfit claims that the normative truth “the nature of agony gives us a reason to want to avoid future agony” is more intrinsically plausible

20 It is unclear which normative truths Parfit thinks are necessary; it appears that those which he calls “fundamental” are necessary (Vol.2:489). It may be that, similar to mathematical truths, normative truths are necessary when they are true, but this doesn't tell us *which* beliefs are true (Vol.2:507).

than any argument we could give in its defence (Vol.2:551). Again, the badness of agony is not something we need to go out and verify through empirical testing, nor explain in any detail; if we understand what it is to be in agony, this is enough to grasp the truth that we have reason to avoid it. Thus, self-evident beliefs are intrinsically credible or intrinsically plausible, and we are justified in having them simply by understanding their content (Vol.2:491).²¹

The self-evident status of fundamental normative truths makes them good candidates for being known through intuition. Since self-evidence is an epistemic status of a proposition and not a normative property, the property of being self-evident is not itself the object of intuition (Vol.2:508-9). In other words, we do not intuit that a truth is self-evident, rather a truth's self-evidence is what warrants our belief in it without inferring it from other beliefs. Self-evidence can help explain how we might come to know a truth without inferring it from other premises, but just because we think a truth is self-evident, doesn't mean it actually is: Parfit is careful to clarify that we can be wrong about which truths are self-evident (Vol.2:490, 508). Though it is intuitively clear and self-evidently true that certain acts like torturing children merely for fun are wrong, most of our moral beliefs cannot rest on "such separate intuitions" (Vol.2:544). This is why, when he talks about the ways in which moral truths are analogous to mathematical truths, most of the comparisons are only in regard to fundamental normative truths such as the one above. Apart from fundamental normative truths, most of the time we will have to "assess the strength of various conflicting reasons, and the plausibility of various principles and arguments" in an attempt to achieve reflective equilibrium among our moral beliefs (Vol.2:544). Despite these difficulties, Parfit thinks it is clear that we have an intuitive ability to recognize fundamental normative truths such as the badness of being in agony.

Given the fallibility of our intuitions, Parfit doesn't think that deep and widespread moral disagreement is evidence that there are no objective moral truths. First,

21 See Matthew Bedke's article "Intuitionist Epistemology in Ethics" for a helpful overview of various intuitionist epistemologies used in ethics, and the relationship between self-evidence and intuitionism (2010).

the possibility that different people may find conflicting beliefs self-evident is not sufficient to conclude that there are none, and it may be the case that this would rarely happen with careful reflection on our beliefs (Vol.2:545). Second, if in fact we find that people disagree in seemingly ideal conditions, this is still not enough to conclude that there are no self-evident moral truths. It is true that “if everyone knew all of the relevant non-normative facts, used the same normative concepts, understood and carefully reflected on the relevant arguments, and was not affected by any distorting influence, we and others would have similar normative beliefs” (Vol.2:546). However, since people are fallible, there will be mistakes and disagreements even in perfect conditions. Thus all that is needed to show that pervasive disagreement does not impugn self-evident truths known through intuition is to defend the idea that in ideal conditions, “we would nearly all have sufficiently similar normative beliefs” (Vol.2:547). Since there are a number of truths that seem to meet these conditions, such as the belief that the nature of agony gives us a reason to avoid it, or that torturing children merely for fun is wrong, we can conclude that there are in fact self-evident truths known through intuition.

To sum up, moral claims can be objective in two ways: when they are based on the facts that make an outcome worthwhile, and when they are true. The facts that make an outcome worthwhile give us objective reasons because they do not vary with individual subjective preferences; the facts that lead us to call smoking “bad” hold regardless of whether a person happens to like smoking or not. We can know which facts give us reasons and which outcomes are valuable through rational intuition, and fundamental moral truths are particularly accessible in this way, since they are self-evident and thus require no further argument to warrant belief. Self-evident moral truths are central to Parfit's defence of objectivity because they give us objective reason for action, and they are the type of normative truths most reliably accessible through intuition.

2.3 Quietism about values and normative properties

Parfit's claim that self-evident normative truths do not have any problematic ontological implications, and that intuition need not be thought of as a mysterious

perceptual faculty, follows a recent “quietist” trend in metaethics.²² While the term “quietism” can be understood in a number of ways, for the present context it describes the attempt to “quiet” or minimize worries about the metaphysical and epistemological challenges that a particular philosophical view faces. A famous example of these kinds of challenges in metaethics is expressed in Mackie's queerness argument, which states that the kind of objective properties which would be needed to make moral truths intrinsically action-guiding would be metaphysically “queer” or mysterious and would thus require an equally mysterious epistemology.²³ Quietist strategies for addressing problems such as the one Mackie identifies might be to downplay the severity of the problem identified, or, a more common recent approach, to suggest that metaphysical and epistemological questions can be successfully addressed by substantive normative theorizing.²⁴ Whatever the strategy, quietism is especially appealing to those who hold realist views, and in

22 Most broadly, quietism is a rejection of theorizing or constructive arguments as a way of addressing philosophical problems, and often involves refusing to provide a straight answer to a philosophical problem (Macarthur 2008:7. Price 2011: 249-252, and Rosen 1994). This may be because the quietist finds the problem is incoherent and ought to be rejected, or because the problem needs revision to be fruitfully discussed. One can be a global quietist and reject theorizing altogether, or a quietist about one particular domain of theorizing; the latter is the more common type of quietism. For example, one can be a quietist about a concept (e.g. “witch”), an issue (e.g. whether moral claims are mind-dependent), or an entire discourse (e.g. the realism/anti-realism debate). Thus quietism on one level does not entail quietism on another. One of the most common types of quietism concerns metaphysics, and is a rejection of the need to settle metaphysical questions in one area in order to theorize in another. An example relevant for current purposes is the recent claim by some philosophers (such as Scanlon, Parfit, Nagel and Dworkin) that realism about ethics does not face a significant explanatory burden in metaphysics, a view that Tristram McPherson calls “metaphysically quietist normative realism” (2011).

23 J.L. Mackie, *Inventing Right and Wrong*, p.38,40.

24 For an example of the first type of possible quietist response, see Parfit's claim that Mackie conflates objectively prescriptive values with beliefs that necessarily motivate, with the result that if one does not hold that normative claims are necessarily motivating (as Parfit does not), one is not burdened with the problem as Mackie frames it (2011: vol.2, 448-451). In this case the difficulty of moral knowledge that realism faces is not denied (Parfit goes on to address such problems in Part 6 of *On What Matters*), but the severity of Mackie's charge is diminished by showing that one can believe in objective moral facts without also believing that they are intrinsically motivating. For an example of the second type of quietist response, see R. Chappell's claim that rather than trying to answer a skeptical charge like Mackie's, the “more appropriately modest philosophical goal” for realists is simply to provide an internal, substantive defense of claims to moral knowledge (2012: 5). In this case, the metaphysical problem of how we could have knowledge of non-natural normative facts despite their lack of causal properties is diminished by providing an internal defense of our claims to knowledge, arguing that we have nowhere else to start but from the substantive premises that seem to us to be true. Further examples of the quietist strategy of avoiding challenges on a metaethical level by dropping to the normative level are Dworkin's claim that there is no external, non-substantive standpoint from which to assess normative theories (1996), and Nagel's similar view that any external metaethical view must be held in check by internal substantive considerations (1997).

particular non-naturalist realists, in that it allows a possible way to deflect or reduce the impact of common metaphysical and epistemological objections that realist views face.²⁵ If non-naturalists can find a way to explain how there can be non-natural moral facts that do not introduce any new and mysterious metaphysical entities nor pose any special epistemological difficulties such as Mackie claims, their views may avoid some of the criticism which has dogged non-naturalist realist views in the past.²⁶

Two non-naturalist realists who have recently offered a quietist response to metaphysical and epistemological challenges to their views are Thomas Scanlon and Derek Parfit. Scanlon defends a contractualist account of morality according to which judgements about right or wrong actions are best understood as claims about reasons and about whether or not our actions are justifiable to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject.²⁷ He subscribes to what he calls “Reasons Fundamentalism,” the view that truths about reasons are normative and not reducible to or identifiable with non-normative truths such as those about the natural world.²⁸ However, despite the fact that truths about reasons are non-natural, Scanlon denies that such truths commit him to facts or entities that are metaphysically odd or problematic.²⁹ The worry commonly raised to non-naturalist views is that it seems difficult to explain what the metaphysical status of

25 However, to be fair, non-naturalist realists are not the only ones to attempt to downplay the metaphysical and epistemological difficulties their views face. Expressivists such as Simon Blackburn have responded to criticism that their views cannot explain what it is for a moral claim to be true by arguing for a minimalist account of truth, according to which to say that a claim is true is simply to restate or reaffirm the claim (1998, chapters 3 and 9). Thus in addition to a minimalist view of truth, Blackburn adopts the second quietist strategy outlined above, claiming that metaethical questions about what makes something wrong are sufficiently answered from an internal, substantive point of view (see also his 1993: 172, 173). For a response, see James Dreier’s provocative argument that expressivists such as Blackburn, Gibbard and Timmons end up either explaining very little about how their view can respond to metaphysical and epistemological problems or sounding so much like realists that it is difficult to see how their views succeed in avoiding the same problems (2004).

26 The most common criticism of non-naturalist views have been versions of Mackie’s criticism: that the non-naturalist view of moral facts is too metaphysically mysterious to be defensible, and implies an equally mysterious and problematic epistemology. See for example Christine Korsgaard’s arguments to this effect (1996: 33-46). Related criticisms of non-naturalism have been that it doesn’t fit well with our best scientific practice. For example, in the early 1900’s philosophers inspired by the logical empiricist movement argued that since it was unclear what the truth conditions for moral claims could be, they were best thought of as expressions of emotions rather than statement of fact or belief, as the realist claims (see C.L. Stevenson 1937, and A.J. Ayer 1952).

27 1998, chs 4 & 5.

28 2014: 2, 23.

29 1998: 2, 57; 2014: 16-52.

such truths could be, if they are not the kind of thing discerned by our best scientific practice. Scanlon's response is that there are different kinds of truths in different domains, and while science is appropriate for assessing truths about the natural world, truths in other domains such as the moral or mathematical should be judged by the standards appropriate to those domains (2014:19-21). Claims about reasons are not claims about special entities but about natural facts and the relation of these facts counting in favor of some action or attitude, and what it means to count in favor of an action or attitude is determined by the standards of the normative domain (2014: 25,30). Scanlon thus adopts a version of the first quietist strategy introduced above: he downplays the severity of possible metaphysical objections, in this case by arguing that metaphysical questions should be answered in a domain-specific manner rather than being held to the standards set by science.

As we saw in the previous section, Parfit adopts a strategy similar to Scanlon by arguing that moral truths should be considered more like those of mathematics than the natural sciences, and that truths in the mathematical and moral domain may not have any ontological status at all. His defense of non-naturalist realism employs both quietist strategies, which we will see shortly. For now, the comparison to Scanlon is meant to demonstrate a current theme in the metaethical literature of defending robust realism not by rejecting metaphysical and epistemological challenges outright but by downplaying their significance in various ways.³⁰ The question is whether or not such a defence works.

30 Other non-naturalist realists who have recently offered defences of moral realism which seek to downplay the metaphysical and epistemological implications of their views are Michael Huemer (2005) and Russ Shafer-Landau (2003). For example, Huemer argues that intuition is no more "queer" than other means of knowing such as perception, since each appeals to its own methods and cannot be accounted for by other means such as reasoning or conceptual analysis (111). Shafer-Landau argues that the non-naturalist construal of moral facts does not "signify any metaphysical profligacy" any more than belief in biological or historical facts do for failing to be captured in purely physical terms (72). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess these claims in any detail, both authors seem to me to downplay a significant difference in their examples, namely that both perceptual and biological facts can be verified in manner consistent with our best scientific practices in a way that intuitive, moral claims cannot. For the relevance of this line of criticism, see Gilbert Harman's argument regarding the crucial disanalogy between forms of reasoning in scientific and moral matters, for example the role of observation in the first (1977).

A number of philosophers have recently suggested that it does not. Tristram McPherson argues that Scanlon's quietist approach to reasons only shifts the focus of metaphysical enquiry rather than silencing it. Recall Scanlon's claim that we can explain how claims about reasons can be true or false by appealing to standards of correctness for the domain of practical reasoning, rather than assuming that such claims imply the existence of mysterious non-natural entities. A reasonable question is, what makes the standards of correctness for any particular domain true or false? Scanlon's answer is that we can be confident of the correctness of such standards if we have no reason to regard the process we used for arriving at them as defective (1998: 63). However, McPherson argues that this reply leads Scanlon into “an objectionably tight explanatory circle,” since standards of reasoning are explained in terms of facts about reasons yet facts about reasons are in turn determined by standards of reasoning (2011: 231). The question of what makes a statement about reasons true remains unexplained.

Christine Korsgaard criticizes Parfit's similar quietist denial of the ontological issues his view faces in *On What Matters*. Korsgaard argues that despite Parfit's insistence that moral truths do not imply any mysterious metaphysics on his view, he is nonetheless committed to Platonism about normative facts. This is because Parfit holds that moral truths are synthetic a priori: they are not analytic nor learned through experience, but a priori through intuition. If this is so, argues Korsgaard, then Parfit owes us some account of how moral judgements are synthesized, or how the subject and predicate are linked; for example, some account of why it is a necessary truth that pain is to be avoided no matter what possible world it is experienced in. We cannot know through experience, since moral truths are a priori on Parfit's view. Since his answer is that we can know this truth through intuition, with which we “see” that pain is bad, Korsgaard argues that this commits him to a Platonic realm of some kind, accessible through intuition alone.³¹ Thus despite his insistence otherwise, Parfit's intuitionism makes moral facts mysterious.

31 “Normativity, Necessity, and the Synthetic a priori: A Response to Derek Parfit,” Unpublished response to Parfit's *On What Matters*, 2.

Simon Blackburn also argues that some things remain mysterious on Parfit's view. Responding to Parfit's criticism of his own view that it wrongly deflates the truth of moral claims to substantive moral questions, Blackburn argues that Parfit's account of truth is no better off. He claims that when asked what it would mean for moral judgements to be true, Parfit simply restates the judgements in closely equivalent terms, and thus evades the question.³² For example, he holds that what it would be for something to be wrong is that there are decisive reasons against it. Blackburn argues that to say that there are decisive reasons against doing something is a substantive moral claim, made from within a particular normative view. What is missing is an account of truth or decisive reasons that does not rely on substantive claims of any kind. Without this, Parfit's view does not contribute anything to metaethical questions about truth.

Regardless of the success of these objections, they suggest that more work needs to be done to explain when worries about metaphysical and epistemological implications may be legitimately quieted, and when such approaches instead serve to obscure genuine problems. The latter seems to be true in Parfit's case. His efforts to quieten any difficulties with his view begin early, in his discussion of how facts give us objective reasons, where he emphasizes the role natural facts play in giving reasons, and downplays the value of outcomes. This leads to a puzzle over the role of value in his account of reasons.

In the opening chapter of *On What Matters*, Parfit presents what seems at first glance to a very straight-forward, non-mysterious idea: facts give us reasons. The examples he chooses contribute to this sense of simplicity: the fact that I'm allergic to apples gives me a reason not to eat them, and the fact that a poisonous snake is on the trail in front of me gives me a reason to run away. Nothing could be simpler. His emphasis on facts about the object of our desires rather than our desires themselves as the source of reasons further contributes to the sense that this is a straight-forward view: there are facts about things in the world that give anyone a reason to act, regardless of

32 *Forthcoming (November 2016), Does Anything Really Matter? Parfit on Objectivity*, Edited by Peter Singer, Oxford University Press, 5.

their desires. For example, the fact that smoking is likely to shorten my lifespan gives me a reason not to smoke regardless of how much I desire to smoke. Again, the relationship between facts and reasons is presented as uncomplicated: my reason not to smoke is not a complex process of weighing my desire to enjoy smoking against the risk of getting cancer, because the relationship between facts and reasons is not up to me. It's up to the facts.

Except that it's not quite that straight-forward. We encounter a lot of natural facts in any given day; which ones should we take to be reason-giving? There must be some way to tell which ones we should take as normatively relevant, for surely not all possess this property. Parfit's answer is that it is the facts that make an outcome worthwhile or valuable that are reason-giving. This means that knowing which natural facts are reason-giving requires already knowing which outcomes or acts are valuable. For example, if I didn't already know or believe that a long life was valuable, the fact that smoking shortens my lifespan would not stand out as reason-giving for me, but simply one of many natural facts about smoking, such as the fact that cigarettes contain nicotine. Value thus seems to play an important epistemological role in identifying which natural facts are reason-giving.

If value plays this role, then knowing what is valuable is very important for knowing what natural facts are reason-giving, and the value of outcomes is arguably less easy to discern than Parfit makes it seem. The smoking example, a relatively uncontroversial one in the scope of things, already hints at the complexity. A smoker may object that the value of a longer lifespan is not set by the facts about smoking completely, but by other facts about the smoker's life, such as the fact that she is already dying from ALS and wants to enjoy cigarettes in her final years of life. While Parfit can account for this by saying that other reasons may outweigh her reason not to smoke in this case, the point is that the relationship between facts and reasons is more complicated than he makes it. There is often some weighing that must be done, and at least in some cases, people may decide differently about whether the natural facts make something valuable or not. The force of many of his examples, such as the smoking one, rely on agreement about the value of outcomes. Yet the value of outcomes is often contested, so that some

people take the facts about factory farming (that it causes significant animal and environmental harm) to give us a reason not to support it, while others do not see these facts as reason-giving at all. How do we know who is right? What makes some natural facts have reason-giving force while others do not? Since we must know the value of an outcome in order to know which natural facts are reason-giving, Parfit's explanation that the facts that are reason-giving are the ones that make an outcome worthwhile or valuable is less than helpful.

The picture is further complicated when we consider that the concept of value that Parfit works with is value “in the reason-implicating sense,” which means that to call something good or worthwhile is to say that there are certain kinds of facts about this thing's nature that give us reason to respond to it positively (Vol.1:38,45). Thus what is valuable is explained in terms of natural facts: when the facts about something give us reason to pursue it, it is valuable. A reasonable question then is, *which* natural facts are these, which give us reason to pursue them, and thus make an outcome good? And how do we pick them out?

The answer Parfit gives appears circular, or at the very least uninformative: if we ask which natural facts give us reasons, we are told, “the ones which make certain outcomes worthwhile.” But if we ask what outcomes are worthwhile, we are told, “the ones which natural facts give us reason to pursue.” The reason-giving natural facts are used to identify worthwhile outcomes, and worthwhile outcomes are used to identify reason-giving natural facts. In other words, we must know which natural facts are reason-giving in order to know which outcomes are valuable, but as we saw above, we must know which outcomes are valuable in order to know which natural facts are reason-giving. Since each is required to know the other, it is unclear how we get started in knowing which facts give us reasons. Do we start with what we already value? What if we are wrong, and the natural facts about an outcome do not actually give us a reason to pursue it? We need some way to know whether or not we have correctly identified the reason-giving facts.

To put it another way, to say that certain natural properties give us reasons because they make an outcome valuable is an empty claim, because Parfit *defines* valuable as having natural properties that give us reasons. This would mean that natural properties give us reasons because they give us reasons, which tells us nothing. His explanation is therefore circular, and explains little about what it is for something to be valuable. It also makes natural facts and valuable outcomes each have explanatory priority over the other, which doesn't make sense. That is, it cannot be that natural facts alone tell us which outcomes are valuable, otherwise the normative property of being a reason would not be necessary in identifying reason-giving facts, and Parfit clearly thinks it is. If this is the case, then a more developed account of what it is for something to be valuable (an account that does not define value in terms of reason-giving facts) is required.

Perhaps the explanation for this circularity is simply that on Parfit's view, the terms "valuable" and "having reason-giving natural facts" are synonymous: to call something valuable is just another way to say that there are natural facts about this thing which give us a reason to pursue it. In this case, one cannot be expected to have explanatory priority over the other, and value doesn't play the role I've argued it does. If this is the case, Parfit also does not owe us a more developed account of value since he has already established that "valuable" is synonymous with "having reason-giving natural facts." However, the objectionably tight explanatory circle does not go away even if these are synonymous. If we ask which natural facts are reason-giving, we will be directed back to those which make an outcome worthwhile. But if "worthwhile" is synonymous with "having reason-giving natural facts," we still don't know *which* natural facts these are; we know that when an outcome is worthwhile, this means that there are natural facts about its nature that give us a reason to pursue it. Parfit's explanation is unhelpful because we still do not have an account of how to identify which natural facts we should take to be reason-giving that does not invoke the value of outcomes, which as we saw above is circular. To summarize: on Parfit's account there are natural facts about a thing's nature or properties that make it valuable and give us reasons to pursue it. What we don't know is which natural facts these are; not only how to identify them, but some explanation of what distinguishes those which are reason-giving from those which are not.

Another explanation may be that reason-giving natural facts are distinguished from all of the other natural facts by having the normative property of being a reason. Recall Parfit's claim that whenever a natural fact gives us a reason for acting, it has the normative property of being a reason (Vol.2:280). Since natural facts do not give us reasons for acting without this normative property of being a reason, perhaps they are the key to being able to pick out which natural facts are to be taken as reasons counting in favour of some action. In this case, "valuable" would become synonymous with "having the normative property of being a reason." Now we would learn that when an outcome is valuable, this means that there are natural facts about it that have the property of being a reason. But this only pushes the question further back: which natural facts have this property, and how do we find them? The puzzle about which natural facts give us reasons on Parfit's account remains.

A result of this explanatory circle is that it leads Parfit to make a quietist move that he criticizes other philosophers for: explaining external questions with internal answers. In his discussion of Blackburn's quasi-realism, Parfit objects that Blackburn evades the metaethical question of what it would be for a moral judgement to be true or false by dropping to the normative level and answering a particular moral question (Vol.2:397). For example, Blackburn argues that cruelty is wrong not because we happen to find it offensive, but because of the features that make it offensive.³³ In other words, Blackburn gives an answer which is internal to a particular normative moral framework (that the facts about cruelty make it wrong), rather than answering the external metaethical question about truth (what would make cruelty, or anything else, wrong?). Blackburn's answer reflects his minimalist approach to truth, and is an example of the quietism described at the beginning of this section.³⁴ Parfit argues that this attempt to answer to an external question from an internal perspective simply misses the point and

33 1993: 172-173.

34 Blackburn holds a deflationist or minimalist view of truth, according to which to say that an ethical view is true is simply to affirm it, so that the sentences "murder is wrong" and "it is true that murder is wrong" say the same thing (1998:296). This view is quietist in the sense that it attempts to downplay (deflate) worries about what it could mean for a moral statement to be true by claiming that the notion of truth invoked in moral claims is simple and unproblematic. See Dreier (2004) for a criticism of minimalist views of truth.

fails to explain what is at issue: what it would be for a moral claim to be mistaken (Vol.2:399). It is a bid to quieten worries about moral truth that Parfit does not accept.

The irony is that Parfit makes a similar move in his explanation of the relationship between natural facts, reasons, and values. That is, he employs the second quietist strategy outlined above and answers questions about the value of outcomes by dropping from the external, metaethical perspective and offering an internal, normative answer which simply asserts their value.³⁵ For example, in his explanation of how events can have intrinsic features which give us reasons to want them, he asks rhetorically, “who could possibly deny that the nature of agony gives us reasons to want to avoid being in agony?” (Vol.1:57). Similarly, he gives no argument for why things like a longer lifespan are valuable, but simply assumes their value is one of the facts that make outcomes such as smoking bad. He seems to take the value of outcomes as obvious in these cases.³⁶ This makes his answer no more informative than Blackburn's, since as shown above, his explanation of what makes an outcome valuable is obscure. Of course most of us agree that it is bad to be in agony or good to live a long life, but these particular substantive claims do not establish the truth of Parfit's view over that defended by Blackburn. These claims also do not answer the right question: we want to know not whether pain is bad or a long life good, but what *makes* them bad or good.³⁷ That is, Parfit must give an external

35 Parfit may agree with Dworkin that all relevant moral questions are internal, first-order, moral questions (1996). However, in this case he couldn't criticize Blackburn for giving the internal answer he does, since he also gives internal answers, and he would need to show what would make his account of truth more successful from this internal standpoint than Blackburn's or any other in order to defend his non-naturalist realism as a more successful metaethical view.

36 Richard Chappell has recently defended Parfit's strategy of falling back on internal claims to defend moral truth. Identifying another type of circularity in realist views such as Parfit's and his own, Chappell admits that it “sound hopeless circular to use our own moral judgements to assess our moral reliability” but claims that, since it is impossible to satisfy the skeptic, we need only give an internal defence of our claims to knowledge (2012:5). Thus similar to Parfit, Chappell assumes that realists can avoid difficult metaethical questions about truth by answering them on an internal, substantive level, and that realists are not required to answer such questions because they cannot hope to satisfy the skeptic. This is a problematic view in that it seems to conflate genuine metaethical questions with skepticism, rather than working to clarify key features of a realist view, such as what moral facts are.

37 Parfit's explanation of what makes agony bad will not suffice as a general principle, since having sensations we dislike will not capture all of the features involved in making moral judgements—not all outcomes involve sensations we like or dislike. In addition, as Street points argues, Parfit's explanation of what makes pain bad comes very close to subjectivism, since if we didn't intensely dislike pain, it seems that it would not be bad (2009:283).

account of what it is for something to be bad or good if he intends to offer a metaethical account of moral truth.³⁸ If his above statement about agony is taken as a metaethical explanation, then it suggests a principle along the lines of “something is valuable when it seems undeniable that it is valuable.” In fact he comes close to saying exactly this when he states that self-evident normative truths are intrinsically indubitable or credible, and thus that no argument can or must be given in their defence (Vol.2:508-510). I will argue in the next section that a principle such as this is problematic, but for now, all that is needed is to note that rather than explaining what kinds of natural facts or features make an outcome valuable or give us a reason to pursue it, Parfit simply asserts its value. Like Blackburn, Parfit drops to an internal, normative level to answer an external, metaethical question, which leaves questions about the relationship between natural facts, reasons, and values unanswered.

To conclude, Parfit's quietism about the relationship between natural facts, reasons, and values leads to a number of challenges for his account. First, since he explains values and reason-giving facts in terms of each other, his account appears circular, so that we learn little about either. This is important, because his first argument in defence of moral objectivity is that facts can give us objective reasons to act. Yet facts do not give us objective reasons without knowing the value of outcomes, which means that the lack of clarity in his account over which facts give us reasons and why weakens his defence. Second, the circularity in his view leads Parfit to avoid metaethical questions about which outcomes are valuable by giving answers on a normative level, a quietist move which leaves the mystery around reasons intact and for which he has recently criticized others. The upshot of these problems is that moral objectivity on Parfit's account hangs on the success of his epistemology, since if I cannot know the value of outcomes or which facts give me reasons to act, then I do not have an objective reason to act. In the next section, I argue that his epistemology is not up to this task.

38 Chappell adopts the same strategy by claiming that a “fitting psychology” is one which takes the badness of pain as a provisional moral datum, and thus reflects or “fits with” the objective normative facts, whatever they may be (14). What is missing is an account of what constitutes objective normative facts. By using substantive claims to defend his epistemology, Chappell arguably begs the question about how to know normative facts from the outset.

2.4 Quietism about epistemological problems

Parfit's second claim in his defence of moral objectivity is that moral judgements are objective when they are true, and that we can know whether they are true using rational intuition. His strategy for quietening worries about his epistemology is two-fold: first, he draws on an analogy to the epistemology used in mathematics and logic to show how rational intuition need not be considered mysterious. Second, he claims that since knowledge of most moral truths comes through intuition plus the process of reflective equilibrium, disagreement about intuitions need not impugn intuition on the whole. In this section, I argue that neither defence of intuitionism is successful.

To begin with, morality seems too different from mathematics and logic for the analogy to knowledge in these domains to be helpful. To review, the reason Parfit draws on this analogy is that on his view, whenever a natural fact gives us a reason for action, there is always the normative, non-natural fact or property that this natural fact is reason-giving. Thus he needs some way to explain how we could know the non-natural fact, since knowledge of natural facts is typically less controversial. The analogy to math and logic is supposed to quieten worries about whether we'd need some special faculty to know non-natural facts: rational intuition suffices in both domains, and need not be any more mysterious in morals than in math. As with any argument by analogy, success depends on whether there are enough relevant similarities to make the comparison illuminating. I suggest that there are in fact two significant *disanalogies* between morality and mathematics and that these make it less clear how the analogy helps Parfit's argument.

First, as others have pointed out, one important difference between philosophy in general and mathematics is the role of proofs. In the latter, intuitions can be checked through proof to confirm whether they are correct, whereas in philosophy there is no agreed-upon procedure for determining truth.³⁹ This is even more so the case in moral philosophy, where the nature of moral claims is debated and there is disagreement about

39 See Williams (1995: 182-190), and Justin Clarke-Doane (2014) for arguments to this effect.

whether they even count as beliefs or not.⁴⁰ Even though Parfit states that most of our moral beliefs cannot rest on intuitions alone but must be examined and defended in an attempt to reach reflective equilibrium, the lack of agreement on what constitutes moral truth makes this process too different from that of a proof in mathematics to gain any credibility just by comparing them. Although reflective equilibrium may well be the best method we currently have to “prove” our moral intuitions, the standards for truth are worked out in much more detail in mathematics than in moral philosophy, so that “seeing” truth in the former is a much less mysterious process than it is in the latter.⁴¹ Thus given the broad disagreement about knowledge in philosophy, especially in ethics, and the lack of similar method for confirming the accuracy of intuitions, the role and significance of intuitions seems very different in these domains. This makes the analogy less persuasive, and does not tell us anything about rational intuition in the moral case.

Second, it is unclear how moral truths can be self-evident in a way analogous to either math or logic. Parfit claims that some beliefs can be self-evidently true, not in an analytic or conceptual sense only but in the sense that if we understand their content, it is obvious that they are true (Vol.2: 490, 508). Since self-evident beliefs are by definition those which do not need to be inferred from other beliefs, he thinks we can recognize their truth just by rational reflection on their contents. However, unless math or logic are self-evident in a similar way, it is unclear what we gain by comparing knowledge of moral truth to either of these. It makes sense why we can gain knowledge about truths in these domains just by thinking about them, if the type of truth is analytic—if we understand the definition or concepts involved, then we can recognize truth of claims involving these concepts. But Parfit argues that there is another, third kind of self-evident

40 For example, non-cognitivists think that moral claims are not representational but expressive: they do not describe the world, but express the speaker's attitudes and dispositions about the world. Blackburn (1999) and Gibbard (2011) have both offered arguments to this effect.

41 Philosophers such as Philip Kitcher think this is true of other areas of science as well. Regarding, for example, the contrast between evidence for scientific claims and that for moral claims, he states: “whereas the standardization of observations and experimental findings is crucial to scientific objectivity, when people offer their judgements about puzzle cases in ethics there are absolutely no standards for when they are doing it well, no serious understanding of what they are doing or how, no sense of how their judgements might be distorted by prior commitment to some ethical principle—and thus no way of knowing whether their reports have the slightest evidential worth” (2012).

truth which is not captured by either of these categories, and this is the kind that he thinks applies in the case of moral beliefs. The only example from math or logic that he offers to explain this third kind of self-evidence is about the logical truths of *Non-Contradiction* or *Modus Ponens*, for which he thinks no helpful arguments can be given “because such arguments would have to assume some of the truths that we are trying to prove” (Vol.2:509). It is unclear what this is supposed to tell us about self-evidence in the moral case; perhaps the analogy is meant to pick out the fact that we often appeal to other moral truths when trying to defend a moral claim. However, there is a significant disanalogy in that helpful arguments are often expected and necessary to defend intuitions in moral deliberation in a way that they may not be in logical cases such as *Modus Ponens*. Without further explanation, it is unclear how exactly self-evident moral truths are similar to self-evident truths of mathematics and logic and what we are supposed to learn from this analogy.

A worry that follows if the analogy doesn't hold is how to distinguish rational intuition from ordinary intuition. If we have no analogous way of telling when our rational intuition in morals is incorrect, we may easily mistake our everyday intuition for rational intuition. This is problematic because unlike rational intuition as Parfit presents it, ordinary intuitions are not the most reliable guide to truth. They are shaped by social conditions, and often reflect implicit biases and prejudices that are difficult to uncover without significant effort.⁴² It has seemed intuitively certain to generations of humans that certain races of people are inferior, that women are less intelligent than men, and that the suffering of animals involved in factory farming is justified because they are a natural food-source for humans. Yet we now think that all of these views are morally wrong or at least highly problematic. Thus without a way to tell whether a person is drawing on rational intuition or ordinary, Parfit presents a naive epistemology: the racist student

42 For a recent discussion of the pervasiveness and destructive effect of implicit biases, see Claude M. Steele's “Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do” (2010). Of course, moral reasoning of all kinds can be impacted by various implicit biases, not just the kind that appeals to intuition. The difference is that in the case of methods such as reflective equilibrium, there is the expectation that a person can and should give reasons in defense of their claims, whereas Parfit seems to build exemption from argument into the definition of self-evident truths known by intuition. As I explain below, it is this particular feature of Parfit's view that I find troubling and more prone to bias than other views might be.

might think she can “just see” that her Latina teacher is less competent than her white teachers.⁴³ More needs to be said to explain how the type of rational intuition Parfit has in mind differs from that used in everyday life, and how to tell them apart.⁴⁴

This is particularly important given Parfit's claim that we can know some normative truths without recourse to any argument at all, just by thinking about their contents. Again, these kind of statements seem less problematic for some examples such as agony, but the feeling changes when the example concerns ableism, racism, or sexism. The claim that we are justified in believing these kinds of claims just by rational reflection on their content, without needing to give any argument, begins to seem not only problematic but dangerous: are some moral claims, such as the racist's, justified just because they seem obvious or indubitable to those who hold them? A principle of the type mentioned in the previous section, according to which a moral claim is true when it seems undeniably true, is not only unhelpfully vague but wrongly suggests that confidence is enough to justify moral beliefs.⁴⁵ One reason this approach to moral knowledge is problematic is that it easily reinforces unjust privilege, since the confidence of those in power is typically taken as authoritative. The best way to see this is to consider *whose* intuitions are the ones that are most often considered trustworthy or correct: those with significant power and privilege of various kinds, and in academic contexts, those with educations from elite institutions.⁴⁶ If you are a woman, a person of

43 See Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo's “A Prostitute, A Servant, and a Customer-Service Representative” (in *Presumed Incompetent*, 2012) for examples of this type of racial discrimination and its negative effect on non-white female professors.

44 Perhaps like Sidgwick, Parfit might appeal to the intuitions of experts. However, since those considered experts are often in positions of power and privilege, there is good reason to think that their intuitions will be biased in various ways and are thus not a sufficient test to discern rational from ordinary intuitions. See the paragraph below for more arguments to this effect.

45 See Korsgaard's similar criticism that realism's defence of things like reasons reduces to an expression of confidence, since their claim is that unless there are good reasons to think otherwise, if the best explanation of something is that it is a reason, then that's what it is (1996: 41).

46 Consider, for example, W.D. Ross's claim that the “moral convictions of thoughtful and well-educated people are the data of ethics just as sense-perceptions are the data of a natural science” (*Right and the Good*, 41), a view that is also echoed by Sidgwick when he claims that some aspects of moral theorizing should probably be restricted to an “enlightened few” (*Method of Ethics*: 490). Given the strong historical tendency to give greater weight and credence to the views of those educated by and working within elite institutions, it is not a stretch to think that their intuitions and point of view are likely to be over-represented in academic philosophy, and that this is a reason to scrutinize appeals to intuitive knowledge.

colour, an Asian, a Latina professor, or a person with a disability, you have likely experienced having your intuitions discounted or ignored a great deal of the time.⁴⁷ Given structural injustices and the fallible nature of our intuitions, along with the fact that moral claims are action-guiding, it seems like a bad approach to moral knowledge to claim that we can know and are justified in believing some moral truths just by thinking about their content, without any argument at all.

Since Parfit thinks that it is only the fundamental moral truths which we can defend in this way, and that most of our moral beliefs do not rest on “such separate intuitions,” it might seem like my worry is exaggerated. Perhaps racist, sexist or ableist beliefs are so obviously wrong that they do not count as fundamental moral truths, so that anyone with intuitions that were discriminatory in these ways would be clearly wrong. If this is the case, there are some remaining issues. First, in order for this defence to work, we would need some account of which the fundamental moral truths are, and how to tell which are fundamental from those that are not. The only explanation Parfit gives is that these are the kinds of truths which just seem to most of us to be undeniable, like the badness of causing anyone to be in agony against their will. But “undeniable” seems a vague standard; undeniable to whom? Again, it is difficult to see how this will not end up reinforcing unjust power structures, since the people with the most power in any society are likely to have their views heard and respected more frequently than those without much power.

A second problem with claiming that it is only fundamental moral truths which Parfit has in mind as objects of pure intuition is that our ability to discern reasons-relations, that is, which natural facts give us reasons, begins to look more complicated than the picture Parfit first describes in *On What Matters*. Knowing what we ought to do is not supposed to be a mysterious process, just the recognition when some natural fact counts in favour of a particular course of action that is valuable or worthwhile. As we saw in the previous section, there is a lack of clarity over which natural facts are reason-

47 Sadly, there are many documented cases of exactly this type of discrimination in academia, among other areas of social life. See Sherree Wilson's “They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain” (in *Presumed Incompetent*, 2012) for examples to this effect.

giving, which makes it all the more important to know how we can pick them out. Are we to use intuition to discern these reasons-relations? It would seem not, if intuition is best suited to the fundamental moral truths. Perhaps we use intuition plus reflective equilibrium to discern which natural facts give us reasons as well; if so, it is less straightforward to tell which natural facts give us reasons than Parfit claims. In addition, as Korsgaard argues, it is unclear why intuition allows us to discern this property or fact only in the case of fundamental moral truths and not other moral truths. The extended calculations that are involved in the process of reflective equilibrium seem superfluous if we can use intuition to discern the normative property of being a reason.⁴⁸ If the normative property of being a reason is always there when natural facts give us reasons, as Parfit claims, then it would seem odd that we can use intuition to identify this property only in the case of fundamental moral truths.

The picture that emerges is a sort of dual epistemology: rational intuition allows us to know a few fundamental moral truths, and the rest of the time we must rely on the process of intuition plus reflective equilibrium. I suggest that there are four implications of this picture of moral epistemology. First, intuition of self-evident truths do not have the robust epistemic position that Parfit claims they do: they cannot provide the foundation for all of our other moral beliefs. Since we do not have clear ways for telling when they are wrong, they are shaped by social views, and they are best suited to only a few fundamental truths, intuitions do not give us reliable knowledge of moral truth on their own. Rather, they are only justified by inferential relations with other things we believe; even what seems self-evident may simply reflect custom or bias, and we must scrutinize our intuitions. Thus individual intuitions have incomplete justification, and are not as reliable as foundationalists such as Parfit claim.

Second, Parfit's proposed epistemology appears to be of limited use in most of moral decision-making, and even for parts of his own account, such as how natural facts

48 Korsgaard puts the point slightly differently, in terms of the property of rightness: that the complicated calculations involved in reflective equilibrium do not explain why an action is right, since on Parfit's view an action is right when it has the property of rightness (Unpublished, 3). I don't think this is quite Parfit's view, but I do think her point holds for the normative property of being a reason.

give us reasons. If intuitions about even self-evident truths cannot be completely trusted as I have claimed, and if most of the time, we must rely on the process of reflective equilibrium along with intuition as Parfit claims, then the “intuition plus” method commends itself as the more appropriate epistemology. In this case, it is best to turn to views which endorse reflective equilibrium as the primary epistemology for insight, not to Parfit's realism, since that is the method we'll be using anyway.⁴⁹

Third, if even Parfit argues that for most of moral life, “intuition plus” is necessary to know what to do, then intuitions are better thought of as a starting point for deliberation rather than a kind of “trump card” that can be used to settle moral disputes about the fundamental issues. My comments in this section are not meant to discount the importance or role of intuitions in moral reasoning, or to say that they can never be trusted; even if we wanted to discount them entirely, we'd be unable to do so, since intuition seems part and parcel of how we navigate the world. In fact, intuitions can be important indicators of the need to examine a situation further before making a decision; they can alert us to phenomena that may otherwise escape our notice, such as subtle signs that we have hurt someone or are in danger. And intuitions do not have to be discounted as irrational and thus unreliable, as they appear to be shaped by rational thought processes at least some of the time.⁵⁰ Instead, intuitions should be considered as

49 Note that reflective equilibrium typically relies on some kind of “considered opinions” as a starting point for deliberation, similar to Parfit's proposed intuition of self-evident truths. My point here is not to suggest that Parfit's reliance on intuitions is less warranted, but that since intuitions play a limited role in his view, it is unclear that his epistemology has anything significantly different or better to offer than reflective equilibrium. I claim that in order to show how his intuitionism adds something to reflective equilibrium, he would need to address the problems I mention above.

50 In the recent past, some philosophers thought that empirical evidence supported Parfit's type of view: intuition doesn't involve reasoning, and intuitive knowledge of self-evident truths fits this picture: we don't appear to reason according to principles and rules when we make moral decisions, rather we have an affective sense that something is wrong and then give reasons after the fact to try to support our sense (Haidt & Kesebir, 2007). This has seemed to confirm that rational intuition is more like a perception than of reasoning, so that it's no surprise that we can simply “see” fundamental moral truths. However, more recently, empirical evidence suggests that intuition is also responsive to reasons, although not in the explicit way that typical explicit judgement involves (Railton, 2014). The affective system of which intuitions seem to be a part can be understood as a “perceptually-sensitive, cognitively-rich information-processing system” (Schwartz & Clore, 2007). Thus rather than a quasi-logical ability to immediately grasp self-evident truths, moral intuition is better thought of as an affective response that draws on all kinds of information, making it responsive to reasons and thus the kind of thing that we can defend with reasons.

important sources of information that we use in moral deliberation, and we can and should expect to examine and defend our intuitions in light of other relevant information. For the most part, Parfit would agree: we have to do the hard work of sorting out what to do that's involved in reflective equilibrium. Where Parfit and I part ways is that he thinks that at some point, we can and must fall back on our intuitions about some fundamental moral truths, and that we cannot and do not have to offer any argument for these. For the reasons I have outlined above, I think this option is closed to us; given our fallibility, self-evident truths cannot be used to end discussion simply when they seem to us to be true.

Fourth and finally, the complicated process of weighing intuitions and scrutinizing our reasons and motives that comprises reflective equilibrium suggests that *judgement* plays a crucial role in determining what to do, yet judgement doesn't come up much in Parfit's view. There is the normative property of being a reason that we are supposed to discern using intuition (or "intuition plus"), which tells us which natural facts give us reasons. But intuition of a property seems less like a process involving judgement than a perceptual process or quick recognition; if judgement is involved in discerning which natural facts give us reasons, there is not much said about it. Then there are self-evident truths that we know through intuition, just by reflecting on their contents; there doesn't seem to be much judgement involved here either, in the sense of weighing and assessing reasons. Rather, reflecting on the content of our intuitions seems more like a discovery than a decision about what to do. Thus neither recognizing normative properties nor intuiting self-evident truths seems to require much judgement on Parfit's view. The result is that it seems like *reasoning* drops out on Parfit's view: the rational activity of judging that we typically associate with moral decision-making, such as weighing various alternatives, scrutinizing motives, and considering what the demands of justice might be. Instead, Parfit seems to portray the activity of recognizing a reason for action more as a perceptual exercise than as a process of rational deliberation, which is at odds with the central role he gives to reflective equilibrium. It is also a surprising outcome for a view that claims that normativity is best thought of as in a reason-involving sense.

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Parfit has given us two lines of argument about how to know what really, objectively matters: that certain facts can give us objective reasons to act, regardless of our subjective aims or desires, and that these facts are true and knowable through intuition because they are self-evident. We can know what really matters by considering which facts give us objective reasons to act.

The problem with this view is that Parfit never specifies which facts give us objective reasons to act; it cannot be just any natural fact, since we are surrounded by facts each day and cannot take them all as relevant or reason-giving. It turns out that the facts that make an outcome worthwhile are the ones which give us reasons, but since Parfit defines worthwhile outcomes and reason-giving facts in terms of each other, the explanation is circular and explanatorily impotent. As a result, we learn little about the relationship between facts, reasons, and values.

Furthermore, the epistemology Parfit proposes to discern the mysterious connection between natural facts and reasons, rational intuition, is supposed to gain credibility by its association with math and logic. But it is unclear how math and morals are analogous; in fact they seem quite different, in that there is no similar method of proof by which to confirm when our intuitions are correct, and the notion of self-evidence used in these domains is very different. Self-evident truths about math or logic may not suffer much from a lack of argument in their defence that does not invoke the concepts used in the definition, but moral truths do. It is not sufficient to defend moral claims by saying that they seem intuitively indubitable; since they are not analytic, we can and should give arguments in defence of our claims. To appeal to intuition alone risks enthroneing personal prejudice and using self-evidence as a trump card to end discussion. Instead, intuitions should be taken seriously in moral deliberation, but as a starting point for moral deliberation, not an end when we have nothing else to say. Since we must defend our intuitions by giving reasons in support of them, a more promising way to think of moral objectivity is that our judgements are objective when they are best supported by reasons, not by our intuition alone.

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3 Street on moral objectivity: is personal consistency enough?

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we examined Derek Parfit's non-naturalist moral realism, according to which there are normative, non-natural attitude-independent facts about what we ought to do. We turn now to Sharon Street's response to views such as Parfit's. Street defends a constructivist view of ethics on which normative truth is dependent on our evaluative attitudes. Her view is premised on a rejection of non-naturalist realism, which she argues is impugned by an evolutionary debunking argument. She claims that realists of this sort must be able to account for the pervasive influence of selective pressures on the content of our evaluative judgements, and that they face a dilemma in doing so: if they hold, on the one hand, that selective pressures have led us to "track" normative truth, their account is unacceptable on scientific grounds. This is because there are other, better scientific explanations of why some of our evaluative judgements are selectively advantageous, and because it is unclear how we might have evolved to track non-natural truths when they have no causal powers. If, on the other hand, realists claim that selective pressures have not led us to track normative truth, their view leads to the skeptical conclusion that most of our judgements are likely to be unjustified due to the distorting influence of evolutionary pressures. Street concludes that either way, realist views have no convincing way to account for the influence of Darwinian forces on the content of human evaluative judgements.

As an alternative, Street proposes a constructivist view on which normative truth consists in what is entailed from within each individual's practical point of view. She thinks it is clear that evolutionary pressures have influenced our normative judgements, but rather than claiming that such judgements track attitude-independent truths, she proposes that normative truth is simply a function of the evaluative judgements that these pressures have led us to make. That is, values are not discovered; instead, we create in the act of valuing. One's own values are the source of moral truth and reason for action. Street further claims that while there are no normative truths that hold independently of

our evaluative attitudes, it is still possible to be in error about our normative judgements because they give us the standards for error: we go wrong when we act inconsistently with our own values. Street concludes that while this understanding of moral truth is less robust than realist views, it nonetheless provides all that is needed to capture our attitudes about moral truth and objectivity.

In this chapter, I argue that Street's view of moral objectivity fails to accommodate common moral discourse and practice. The idea that personal consistency is a sufficient standard for normative truth does not square with moral experience. Street claims that what makes a moral claim true is that it is entailed by a person's own values; they truly have a reason to do something only if their values entail that they do. However, we commonly take the facts about a situation to give everyone a reason for acting, not just those who happen to have the relevant values. We also do not think we must consult our own or other people's values before making a moral claim. To do so would make moral claims seem contingent, and this conflicts with the authority and respect we typically accord to moral claims. Street thus offers a view of moral truth and reasoning that fails to align with central features of morality. Her view also has the unfortunate result of making moral disagreement intractable because unless we have shared values, there is little we can say to those we disagree with. On her view, moral disagreement would be reduced to figuring out what a person's current values entail instead of debating about what values to endorse. For these reasons, I conclude that Street's account of moral truth is unsuccessful.

3.2 Street's target: non-naturalist realism

Since Street's argument for a constructivist approach to ethics is premised on a rejection of non-naturalist realism, I'll begin by reviewing Parfit's view and then Street's criticism of this kind of view. I'll emphasize the features of his view that Street subjects to scrutiny: his non-naturalism and the way in which he thinks normative truths are attitude-independent.

Parfit defends non-naturalist realism. According to this view, normative claims are best understood in a reason-involving way: to say that we ought to do something is to

say that we have decisive reasons to do it. Reasons have their source in facts; for example, the fact that I am allergic to apples gives me a reason not to eat them, and the fact that my actions will harm another is reason not to act in this way. However, natural facts alone cannot tell us what we ought to do; whenever a natural fact gives us a reason, Parfit thinks that there is always the non-natural, normative fact according to which this natural fact gives us a reason. Another way to say this is that the natural fact has the non-natural property of being a reason. This is the first feature that makes Parfit's view non-naturalist: he thinks that normative truth cannot be reduced to natural facts alone, but must always involve our recognition of the non-natural property of being a reason. His view is realist in that the facts that give us reasons are not facts about us (such as our desires or other attitudes, as an anti-realist might urge), but the facts about a state of affairs that make it valuable (such as that it relieves pain or promotes well-being). Such facts are thus mind-independent in that they are invariant with respect to our attitudes, and this is what makes them real and objective facts that we can discover.

Parfit's proposed epistemology for discovering these non-natural normative facts is a combination of rational intuition and reflective equilibrium: we use rational intuition to discover the fundamental moral truths, and then the process of reflective equilibrium to work out other truths that follow from these fundamental truths, and to refine our understanding of such truths. Rational intuition describes our ability to recognize normative truths simply by thinking about their content (2011, Vol.2: 490); for example, we can intuitively grasp that torturing children merely for fun is wrong just by thinking about the nature of such an activity. The reason we can do so is that this kind of belief is intrinsically credible; another way to describe it is that it is self-evidently true. A self-evident truth is one whose truth does not need to be inferred from other premises. The wrongness of torturing children merely for fun is such a truth. Fundamental moral truths are those that have these properties of self-evidence and intrinsic credibility, and this makes them particularly well suited to apprehension through rational intuition, since they can be grasped simply by rational reflection on their content. Parfit's use of intuition is the second way in which his view is non-naturalist, since intuition on his view is not a perceptual faculty by which we discern causal relations in the world, but a rational

faculty that allows us to know normative truths in the way that is more akin to logic or mathematics than to the natural sciences (Vol.2: 489).

To connect his epistemology to his view of reasons, Parfit would say that the facts about torturing children merely for fun give us reasons not to do it, regardless of our own attitudes or beliefs; even if we didn't happen to care about the suffering of children, torturing them would still be wrong because the facts about what torturing children involves and which make it a bad thing do not vary with our attitudes. In fact, even if no one thought that torturing children was wrong, it still would be, because moral truth is invariant with respect to our attitudes. In this sense, normative claims are attitude-independent on Parfit's view: they are based on facts about the world, not on our attitudes toward those facts.

Street's response to non-naturalist views such as Parfit's is that they cannot successfully defend the claim that evaluative truths are attitude-independent. This is because, if evolutionary forces have played a significant role in shaping the content of our evaluative judgements, as Street claims, then realists owe an account of this influence. In particular, they must explain how our belief in the kind of mind-independent evaluative truths that they posit are warranted. She thinks that realists, and non-naturalists in particular, cannot successfully do this.⁵¹ Her argument can be summarized as follows.

The first premise is that the forces of natural selection have played a key role in shaping the content of our normative judgements (DD 114). One can see this by noting the impact that acceptance of some evaluative judgements would have had on human reproductive success. For example, imagine two of the first-ever valuing creatures, one of whom happens to value its own survival and nothing else, the second its own destruction and nothing else (CR, 16). It is not difficult to see that evolutionary forces would have

51 Street thinks that some naturalist realist views, which hold that evaluative facts are identical with certain natural facts, also fall prey to her criticism: those that claim that the facts about *which* natural facts the evaluative facts are identical with are independent of our evaluative attitudes. Naturalist realists of this kind would then face the Darwinian Dilemma outlined below. See Street's discussion in section 7 of "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" (2006), hereafter abbreviated as DD. See also the discussion of David Copp's society-centered version of naturalistic realism in section 3.5 of this chapter.

favored the survival of the first and not the second. Street thinks that in light of such connections between certain evaluative beliefs and survival, “it is only reasonable to expect there to have been, over the course of our evolutionary history, relentless selective pressure on the content of our evaluative judgements” (DD 114). In fact, many of the evaluative judgements that humans accept across cultures seem to affirm this connection: we tend to think that if something would promote one's survival, or the interests of a family member, this is a reason to do it (DD 115). This raises the possibility that had our evolutionary history been different, we may have valued different things; for example, had we evolved more on the model of social insects, we may have had overwhelming tendencies to promote the welfare of the entire community over our own individual survival (DD 120). Thus the content of human evaluative judgements seems to have been significantly influenced by the forces of natural selection: we value, at least in part, things that tend to promote our own survival and reproductive success.

Street's second premise is that the significant influence of selective pressures on the content of human evaluative judgements leads to what she calls a Darwinian Dilemma for the realist. She thinks this dilemma arises because realists must take a position on the relationship between the selective pressures outlined above and the attitude-independent truths that realism posits. (I will call these attitude-independent truths “Evaluative Truths” from now on to make the contrast between evaluative judgements and the attitude-independent evaluative truths that realists have in mind more obvious). Realists have two options on Street's view: they may deny any relation between selective pressures and Evaluative Truths, in which case they are faced with the difficulty of showing how our evaluative judgements are not hopelessly off-track; or they may affirm a relation, in which case their view is unscientific. This is the Darwinian Dilemma that Street claims realists face: either option seems untenable. We'll briefly examine each horn of the dilemma in more detail.

If realists claim that there is no relation between the Darwinian-influenced content of our evaluative judgements and mind-independent Evaluative Truths, then they must view the forces of natural selection as a purely distorting influence on our evaluative judgements. This is because the influence from selective pressures seems to be quite

substantial, so that our entire system of evaluative judgements is likely be “utterly saturated” with it (DD 122). If this is the case, and there is no relation between Evaluative Truth and selection pressures, it is likely that many of our evaluative judgements are off-track, and have been so from the outset of our evaluative history. Rather than evolving to recognize Evaluative Truths, it would be the case that “we have been evolving towards affirming whatever evaluative content tends to promote reproductive success” (DD 122). Of course by sheer luck some of our evolutionarily-influenced evaluative judgements will coincide with Evaluative Truth, but given the tremendous force of selection pressures, we cannot assume that this coincidence will be the norm.⁵² Furthermore, it would be difficult to recognize when one had hit upon an Evaluative Truth, since even the process of reflective equilibrium must start with considered judgements in order to rationally reflect on the content of other beliefs (DD 124). How would we know that the evaluative judgements we begin with are trustworthy? This horn of the dilemma thus leads to the conclusion that most of our evaluative judgements are likely to be unjustified. This is not an option the realist will find appealing.

Since realists claim that many of our evaluative judgements are true, a second response may be more plausible: claim that there *is* a relation between our evolutionarily-influenced evaluative judgements and Evaluative Truth. In this case there would be an expected overlap between the content of our evaluative judgements and Evaluative Truth. To explain this overlap, realists might put forward some kind of “tracking account” of the relationship between selection pressures and Evaluative Truth: perhaps humans have evolved to track Evaluative Truths because it is advantageous to our survival to do so. Parfit defends this kind of view, claiming that our ability to respond to reasons and recognize evaluative truths may have conferred upon us advantages that helped us flourish (OWM, Vol. 2: 515). The advantage of the tracking view is that the forces of natural selection do not have to be viewed as purely distorting; rather, humans have

52 Ronald Dworkin defends a view along the lines of this horn of the dilemma: he thinks it is a very lucky coincidence that Evaluative Truth and the normative judgements that natural causes led us to make line up as much as they do (“Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It,” 125). He thinks a lucky coincidence is the only viable explanation because normative properties lack causal properties and thus never play a role in our best causal explanations, so that it is a misguided test for the existence of normative truth to ask about such a role (119).

evolved to track Evaluative Truth and it has proved most selectively advantageous to make judgements that reflect this Truth (DD 126).

The problem with the tracking account is that it fares poorly as a scientific explanation. It offers a hypothesis about the relationship between evaluative judgements and natural selection, namely, that the capacity to discern Evaluative Truths proved advantageous for human survival. Yet, it offers a much less plausible explanation than competing scientific hypotheses, such as that put forward by what Street calls the “adaptive link account” (DD 127). On this view, the tendency to make some evaluative judgements rather than others contributed to human survival not because they tracked Evaluative Truth, but because they “forged adaptive links between our ancestors' circumstances and their response to those circumstances, getting them to act, feel, and believe in ways that turned out to be reproductively advantageous” (DD 127). For example, the evaluative judgement that it is good to help someone in return for their help likely promoted the reproductive success of those who held these judgements. Both the adaptive link account and the tracking account explain the tendency to make this kind of judgement by claiming that it contributed to survival. The difference between them is that on the tracking account, making this kind of evaluative judgement contributed to survival because the judgements were *true*, whereas on the adaptive link account, these judgements contributed to reproductive success because they got our ancestors to respond to their circumstances in ways that promoted this success. In other words, on the tracking account, the *truth* of certain evaluative judgements is what made them advantageous, whereas on an adaptive view, the *behavioural influence* of evaluative judgements made them advantageous, regardless of whether or not they were true (DD 129).

The problem with claiming that the truth of certain evaluative judgements made them advantageous is that their truth doesn't do any explanatory work that is not already accounted for, and in a better way, by the adaptive link account. For example, consider a claim the realist might make: that the reason why the judgement that we ought to care for our offspring promoted reproductive success is that it is true. The simpler and more likely explanation is that creatures who judged that they should care for their offspring tended to adopt behaviours that made the survival of their offspring more likely, and thus left

more of them (2011:13). In other words, the *truth* of the claim that we ought to care for our offspring is not what made such a judgement reproductively advantageous, rather its connection to behaviours that promoted survival made it advantageous. Furthermore, if Evaluative Truths are non-natural and thus lack causal powers as realists like Parfit claim, it is difficult to see how we might have tracked them. Recognition of truths with causal powers, such as the fact that a fire is raging nearby, would have promoted reproductive success; it is less clear how humans might have been selected to recognize truths without causal powers. And since many Evaluative Truths do not seem connected at all to evolutionary survival, the idea that we were selected to track such truths is less than compelling (DD 130, 131). The adaptive link account proposed by Street thus offers better answers to questions such as, why do we tend to judge that our survival is valuable rather than worthless? Why do we judge that we ought to care for our children? The adaptive account reply is that making these kinds of judgements led to certain kinds of behaviour that tended to promote reproductive success. The tracking explanation, by contrast, answers these questions with truth claims: we made these judgements because survival *is* valuable, caring for our children *is* the right thing to do, and so on (DD 132). Such responses shed little light on why our evaluative judgements tend to have the content that they do.

Street's conclusion is that if non-naturalist realists assert any relationship at all between selective pressures on our evaluative judgements and Evaluative Truth, they must defend some kind of tracking account. This is because the only way for realism to hold both that there are attitude-independent Evaluative Truths, and that our attitudes have been shaped by selective pressures in a non-distorting way, is to claim that selective pressures have in some way pushed us toward Evaluative Truth (DD 135). Thus, non-naturalist realists about value are left with the dilemma: by understanding Evaluative Truth as prior to and somehow guiding our evaluative judgements, every causal influence on the content of our evaluative judgements must be viewed as either distorting or tracking (DD 155). If it is distorting, then we have no idea whether our value judgements are horribly mistaken; if it is a tracking relationship, then it is unacceptable on the scientific grounds outlined above.

3.3 Street's constructivist view of evaluative truth

Since Street thinks Darwinian considerations make it implausible that we evolved to track mind-independent evaluative truths, she proposes an anti-realist constructivist view of ethics on which normative truth ultimately depends on our attitudes. She thinks that this is the most plausible view to account for the influence of selective pressures on the content of our evaluative judgements. An overview of her argument is as follows. First, she argues that the value of things ultimately depends on our taking them to be valuable, and takes the above Darwinian considerations to establish this claim. Second, she takes the dependence of value on human attitudes to mean that there are no normative truths that hold independently of all of our evaluative attitudes. Third, this dependence on our attitudes does not mean that it is impossible to go wrong with one's normative judgements; there is still a robust sense in which normative judgements can be erroneous. However, the standards of correctness that determine what counts as an error are ultimately set by our own normative judgements and the requirement of consistency, and not by any normative facts entailed from outside our standpoint. Thus we can go wrong by acting in ways that do not withstand scrutiny from the point of view of our other normative judgements. She concludes that although her view does not provide the robust notion of truth that realists aspire to, it can nonetheless account for normative truth and objectivity.

Before considering each of these premises in more detail, it will be helpful to understand Street's wider view. She defends a view that she calls "metaethical constructivism." While constructivism is understood in a variety of ways, Street takes the distinguishing feature of all constructivist views in ethics to be that the correctness of normative judgements is a question of whether those judgements withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of a set of further normative judgements.⁵³ In other words, the correctness

53 "Constructivism About Reasons," 2, 7, 12, hereafter abbreviated as CR. The term "constructivism" can also be understood as the idea that moral reality is constructed from the states or activities undertaken from a preferred standpoint (Shafer-Landau, 2003:14). However, not everyone agrees on this definition; Brink understands constructivism as the view that moral facts are constituted by the evidence we have for them (1989:19-20).

of moral judgements is “constructed” or constituted by the fact that it withstands this scrutiny. Constructivist views can then be further divided into two categories: those that are versions of “restricted constructivism,” and those that are versions of “metaethical constructivism.” Following the characterization given above, a restricted version of constructivism would claim that it is only some particular, restricted subset of normative judgements that are understood to be correct when they withstand scrutiny from a particular standpoint. Rawls' political constructivism is an example of a restricted version, which holds that the correctness of judgements concerning social or political justice in a liberal democratic society is constituted by these judgements being in accordance with principles that withstand the scrutiny of the original position procedure.

By contrast, metaethical versions of constructivism think that the correctness of all normative judgements, not just a particular subset, should be understood in this way: to be correct is to withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of further judgements about reasons (CR, 3). This is the version that Street defends, arguing that the account of correctness proposed by restricted versions of constructivism applies across the board to moral truth generally, which makes her version metaethical rather than restricted. A few more terms will clarify what is distinctive about metaethical constructivism.

Street identifies three main elements that are common to restricted constructivism and which vary depending on the version under consideration: the target set of normative judgements, the procedure of construction, and the grounding set of normative judgements (CR, 4). The target set of normative judgements is the restricted set of judgements to which a particular version of constructivism's account of correctness is meant to apply. In the case of Rawls, for example, the target set of normative judgements is judgements about justice in a liberal democratic society. The procedure of construction refers to the procedure of reflective scrutiny that a particular view proposes; for Rawls, this is the original position in which rational agents select principles of justice to regulate the basic structure of society.⁵⁴ Finally, there are the grounding set of normative judgements, which provide the standpoint from which the procedure of reflection is

⁵⁴ *Political Liberalism*, p.103.

undertaken. For Rawls, two central conceptions and our judgements endorsing these conceptions constitute the grounding set of normative judgements: the conception of persons as free and equal, and of society as a fair system of cooperation over time. Putting it all together, for Rawls a judgement about social and political justice is correct when it withstands the procedure of reflective scrutiny involved in assuming the original position and is informed by commitment to the two central conceptions of persons and society. The three elements thus set out how each version of restricted constructivism understands correct judgements about a given normative domain.

An important feature of restricted constructivist views that makes them different from metaethical versions is that they do not give an account of what makes the grounding set of normative judgements correct. For example, in Rawls's case, his view speaks to those who hold the conception of persons as free and equal, and of society as a fair system of cooperation over time, but he does not say what makes these conceptions themselves correct. Restricted versions of constructivism can therefore be seen as straightforward exercises in normative reasoning, addressed to those who endorse the grounding set of normative judgements and trying to show what follows from these. However, Street takes even restricted versions to contain the seeds of a metaethical view, captured in what she sees as a key metaethical insight: “that standards of correctness for normative judgements should not be understood as set by an independent order that holds apart from agents' normative commitments, but rather should be understood as set by, or from within, the standpoint of someone who accepts *further* normative judgements” (CR, 14). The idea that determinations of the correctness of normative judgements must always be made from some a particular standpoint is a distinguishing feature of Street's own metaethical constructivism.

Thus metaethical versions of constructivism pick up where restricted versions leave off: they answer the question of how to determine the correctness of grounding judgements. The answer is that what constitutes correctness in the case of grounding judgements is the same as it was for the target judgements in restricted versions, namely, that these stand up to scrutiny from the standpoint of further normative judgements, and these from the standpoint of yet further normative judgements and so on, “all the way

down” (CR, 15). According to Street's view, questions about the correctness of any normative judgement must be asked from some particular, practical standpoint, since this is the only place where the standards of correctness exist.

Explaining why the only standards of correctness exist within a practical standpoint returns us to the first premise of the argument outlined at the outset of this section: that Darwinian considerations support the claim that things are valuable because we take them to be, not because value exists somehow independently of us. The short answer as to why standards of correctness must come from the practical standpoint is that this is the source of value, and hence where our judgements can be in line with our values (and thus correct). There is no value from the non-practical standpoint, which Street calls the theoretical standpoint (more on this below).⁵⁵ The theoretical standpoint is the point of view we take when step back from our normative judgements and consider how we are embedded in the world of cause and effect, and how things like social and historical influences may shape our normative judgements (OT, 2). The longer answer as to why standards of correctness can come only from within the practical standpoint requires a brief review of the Darwinian Dilemma and what Street thinks this implies for value claims.

If value was something that existed independently of human attitudes as the realist claims, so that there are Evaluative Truths that we can discover, the problem arises of what influence selective pressures may have had on our discovery of these Truths. Have our evaluative judgements evolved to somehow track these Truths? As we have seen, Street doesn't think the tracking account is plausible as a scientific explanation: there are better explanations (for example, the adaptive link account), and the tracking account is causally obscure, since it is unclear how we can track Truths which have no causal influence in the world. Yet if we have not evolved to track Evaluative Truths in some way, then it is likely that we've been pushed away from these Truths due to the extraordinary influence of selection pressures. If so, many of our evaluative judgements

55 “Objectivity and Truth—You'd Better Rethink It,” 1-3, 10-11 (Forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol.11, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016). Hereafter abbreviated as OT.

are more likely to reflect selective pressures than Evaluative Truths. Thus the idea that value is attitude-independent, standing apart from the tremendous force of selective pressures or guiding us through these forces with the clarion call of rationality, seems implausible when we consider our evolutionary history.

Street's solution to this dilemma is to give up the idea that value is something we discover in the world. She thinks it much more plausible that value entered the world with valuing creatures: returning to the two hypothetical valuers described earlier, the first was not "correct" in valuing its own survival, and the second was not "incorrect" in valuing its own destruction. This is because, as the above discussion has suggested, there are no independent standards to say which of these two valuers is correct; instead of positing values which either have no causal influence or an obscure one, Street thinks that the better explanation is that value sprang into existence with beings who value (CR, 17). And with these first judgements about value, standards and the possibility for evaluative error also came into existence: valuing creatures could make mistakes by failing to choose actions which promoted or were consistent with their values, whatever those might be. Thus while neither the first nor second valuing creature was choosing the "right" value, once they made this choice, it became possible to make mistakes.

Street thinks that this is a superior explanation to rival views because if value is something we project on the world, and thus something that arrives with valuers, then it is no longer a mystery how our evaluative judgements could be influenced by evolutionary forces yet still be (at least sometimes) true. She explains that "of course there's a striking coincidence between true normative judgements, on the one hand, and the normative judgements that causal forces led us to make, on the other, because normative truth just *is* a (rather complex) function of the normative judgements that causal forces led us to make" (OT, 12). In other words, the mystery is solved because we admit up front that causal forces led us to affirm particular normative judgements and not others, so that it is not surprising that we're able to discover the normative truth: "we merely explore what follows, as a matter of logical and instrumental consistency, from the standpoint of the normative convictions we already hold" (CR 12). The conditions we evolved in led us to value certain things more than others (the safety and well-being of

our family over the well-being of strangers, for example), and these value judgements are sufficient to yield further evaluative truths as logical and instrumental consequences.

Street's claim that value enters the world with valuers brings us to the second premise of her argument, that there are no normative truths that hold independently of all of our evaluative attitudes. This second premise follows naturally from the first: if value is the product of the attitude of valuing, it makes sense that the truth of normative claims depends on our evaluative attitudes. To put it another way, if we create our own values, then the truth of claims about what we have reasons to do (for example, what our values entail) ultimately depends on the attitudes that were employed in creating value to begin with. There is another layer to this claim, however: it is not just the case that all of our collective evaluative attitudes constitute normative truth, but that normative truth for each person is determined by her *own* evaluative attitudes, and not by that of others. Street puts it this way: if something is not entailed from within the standpoint constituted by a person's own evaluative attitudes, then it is not a normative truth for that person (OT, 2). Since this claim is central to her overall view and the focus of my evaluation in the next section, we'll examine it in more detail.

Street understands her claim that normative truth is dependent on our individual evaluative attitudes to be the consequence of adopting the practical standpoint described earlier. To explain, she thinks that whenever we take up the activity of judging some things to be valuable and others not, we necessarily occupy the practical point of view, “the standpoint of a being who judges, whether at a reflective or unreflective level, that some things call for, demand, or provide reasons for others.”⁵⁶ The practical standpoint is thus important because it is the only place where we engage in the activity of evaluating, and so must be the locus of any discussion about normative truths. However, the practical standpoint is also highly individual because practical questions cannot be given general, absolute answers. For example, Street argues that just as the question “Is the Empire State Building taller?” makes little sense without supplying the answer to the question “than what?”, so practical questions such as “Is X a reason to Y?” do not make sense until we

⁵⁶ “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?” 366, hereafter abbreviated as WC.

answer the question, “for whom?” (CR 21). The reason for this is that unless we specify the subject, Street thinks we have not given a standard by which to judge the answer. And this is because on her view, there are no absolute standards (Darwinian considerations settle this point, in her view), so that each person's act of valuing and the standards these values entail must be consulted in order to answer practical questions. That is, the standards set for *me* by my values cannot determine what *you* are to do; practical questions are necessarily individual because value standards are individual, and thus require answers supplied by each individual's own values. Just as it makes no sense to say to the creature introduced above who values her own destruction that she has reason to protect her life, so no one has reason to do things that are not entailed by her own values.

Explaining how our own attitudes are the source of our reasons for action brings us to the third premise of Street's argument, that there is still a robust sense in which normative judgements can be in error on her view. She begins her defense of this claim by pointing out that since reasons must be for someone in particular, it follows that the standards for moral error will also come from that individual's point of view. She thinks that were this not the case, moral disagreement would be impossible. For example, if the truth of a normative claim such as “X is a reason to Y for agent A” depended on the standards set by the point of view of the person making this claim, and not agent A herself, then it would be impossible to sensibly disagree about whether X is truly a reason for A to do Y. This is because “you and I and everyone else, including A herself, can all sensibly disagree about what reasons A has and be talking about the exact same thing, for there's a common question that we're all disagreeing about, namely what withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of A's normative commitments” (CR 20). For example, someone who valued giving to charity could claim that I have reason to give to UNICEF, and if standards were set by any person *making* a moral claim, her claim would be true. Yet if I do not hold values that give me reason to donate money to UNICEF, then I could claim that I do not have any reason to donate, and my claim would also be true. If standards were set by the point of view of the person making the moral judgement, we would both be right (since we are both making moral judgements), and thus unable to sensibly disagree—we would be making (seemingly) contradictory statements that were both true. Therefore, in order to account for moral disagreement and evaluative error,

Street claims that the standards of correctness determining what reasons a person has must be understood to be determined by that person's own set of judgements about her reasons.⁵⁷

So how can one's own evaluative judgements provide adequate standards for moral error? Street argues that as soon as one takes anything at all to be a reason, one thereby “legislates standards according to which, by one's own lights as a valuing agent, one is making a mistake, whether one knows it or not, if one endorses certain other normative judgements” (CR 26). For example, the first valuing creature mentioned above sets a standard for its own behaviour by valuing survival: it would be making an error if it chose actions which endangered its own survival, such as eating a poisonous plant. As soon as a person values more than one thing, a standard is set up, as any evaluative judgements this person makes must withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of each of these values and the judgements they entail. Street's moral epistemology is that “we discover the normative truth by investigating what follows, as a matter of logical and instrumental consistency, from our own, contingently held values in combination with the non-normative facts” (OT 30; also CR 26). Using this process of scrutinizing one's evaluative judgements in reflective equilibrium, a person can discover what they have reason to do. In this way, any set of values will entail that certain actions are mistaken while others are correct; for example, if a person values the well-being of his children but fails to provide the love and encouragement that they need to do well, then he is making a moral mistake—his own values entail that he ought to provide these things.

As the above quote suggests, the force of the “ought” here can be understood in a number of ways on Street's view: it can be logical or instrumental, but also conceptual. It is (logically and instrumentally) inconsistent to say that one values something yet fail to act in ways that align with this value, since one is failing to take the means necessary to

57 Street does not take this to mean that there cannot be any universal truths about reasons; however, they would need to be legislated from within the standpoint of “every creature who takes anything at all to be valuable” (CR 21). That is, such truths could only be universally correct if the standards set by the evaluative judgements of every agent say they are correct. While she is sceptical that there are any such reasons, her view does not rule out this possibility. This means that for Street, morality is essentially contingent or hypothetical: it depends on the values any of us happen to have. But since we tend to have similar values, she thinks this is enough to capture all of the (categorical) moral claims we make.

the end one has chosen. It is also illogical or irrational to fail to do the things entailed by one's own values. Street's stronger claim is that it is part of what is constitutively or conceptually involved in taking oneself to have a normative reason to take the necessary means to do what one takes oneself to have decisive reasons to do (CR 24). So if the father in the above example takes himself to have decisive reasons to care for his child, but then fails to do so, he has not understood what it was to have decisive reasons to care for his child in the first place.

There is a sense in which constructivism can agree with realism that there are evaluative truths that hold independently of whether or not anyone recognizes them. That is, on Street's view, a person can have a reason to do something whether or not she currently judges herself to have it, because having a reason to do something is a function of whether that judgement would be among her evaluative judgements in reflective equilibrium. There could be many judgements implied by the intersection of one's own values that any of us could be currently unaware of, and in error about. In this sense, the truth about what a person has reason to do at any given time can be considered independent of her attitudes at that time, in that she may presently be unaware of what her various evaluative judgements truly imply. Street clarifies that “where antirealists part ways with realists is in denying that there are evaluative truths which hold independently of *the whole set* of other evaluative attitudes we hold or might hold upon reflection” (DD 112). Since value enters the world with valuing beings, there cannot be evaluative truths that hold independently of the judgements entailed by the values held by these beings—there would be nowhere else for such evaluative truths to come from, on Street's view. She takes her explanation of valuing and the standards of correctness that valuing entails to be all that is needed to account for normative truth: “normative truth consists in what is entailed from within the practical point of view” (WC 367).

One consequence of Street's view is that, if our own values set the standards of correctness for moral claims, it may seem that someone with evil values has reason to act evilly and makes no mistake in valuing what he does. Street calls these possible characters “ideally coherent eccentrics” (ICEs for short), and describes them as someone who endorses values that the rest of us find morally repugnant yet whose values are

perfectly coherent.⁵⁸ Examples might be an ideally coherent anorexic who judges that she has most reason to starve herself to death, or an ideally coherent Caligula who has most reason to maximize the suffering of others. ICEs are usually regarded as providing strong evidence in favour of a view such as Parfit's, that there are facts about how an agent has most normative reason to act that hold independently of that agent's evaluative attitudes and what her attitudes entail. In other words, there seem to be some values that one simply ought not to have; one is making a normative mistake in valuing certain things, such as maximizing the suffering of others or starving oneself to death. If this is the case, then ICEs seem to offer compelling evidence that a view like Street's is mistaken.

Street agrees upfront that claims such as “the ideally coherent Caligula has most normative reason to torture people for fun” are consequences of her view (ICE 275). However, she thinks that such consequences are not problematic for her view, because if we carefully examine what an ICE would actually have to be like, we see that their existence will be extremely rare, if not impossible. For example, to be an ideally coherent anorexic, one would have to be an alien being, or something close to it. This person would have to value starving herself to death for the sake of a thin body more than anything else in the world, and would have to hold no other evaluative judgements according to which this value was unworthy; otherwise, she would fail to be ideally coherent (ICE 280). Given the wide range of things a person typically values, holding such a value above all else and valuing nothing conflicting with this value is extremely unlikely if not impossible. And if such a person persistently defended this value above all else and had no conflicting values, we might eventually conclude (after failing to convince her otherwise) that she did in fact have most normative reason to starve herself. Street thinks that it's important to notice that ICEs are nothing at all like real-life human beings, who are never ideally coherent and typically hold values which would make such morally repugnant conclusions extremely unlikely. Thus while her view does lead to the surprising moral claim that an ideally coherent Caligula would have most reason to

58 “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters,” 273. Hereafter abbreviated as “ICE.”

torture others for fun, she thinks that such hypothetical characters are too unlike real-life human beings to be used as evidence that values must be attitude-independent.

One might think that Street's view about ICEs and her claim that each person's values set the standards for normative truth entails that there is not much to say when we encounter people with whom we disagree morally. However, Street thinks that appeals to mistakes about the non-normative facts and inconsistencies among a person's most deeply held values get us further than we think, and are enough to account for most of our normative common sense (ICE 281). That is, most of us care about many of the same things, and this will allow us to make most (if not all) of the moral claims we typically make, on her view. And on the (extremely rare) chance that we did encounter an ideally coherent Caligula or anorexic, we could still make moral claims: we could regard ourselves as speaking truly to say that we loathe Caligula or pity the anorexic, and that it is awful that their values and the normative reasons they entail are like this (ICE 293). In the case of Caligula, Street claims that the rest of us would have every normative reason to intervene, to the point of locking him up, defending ourselves against him, and trying to change him if we could. This is because our own values would entail that such coercive actions are justifiable, since most of us presumably do not value being tortured for fun, and value our own survival and well-being. And although strictly speaking it would be false to tell the ideally coherent Caligula that he had most normative reason not to torture people, since his own values would not entail this claim, we would nonetheless have good reason to tell him this anyway. This is because "sometimes using language as a causal influence, rather than to state the truth, is what we have most normative reason to do" (ICE 293). Just as we might tell the cancer patient that he is looking strong in order to encourage him even when what we say is actually false, so we would be justified in telling Caligula that he is wrong to torture others, and in trying everything in our power to stop him. Therefore, on Street's view we can navigate moral disagreement by appealing to shared values, and may justifiably resort to "browbeating" in the rare event that we meet an ICE (ICE 293).

In conclusion, Street takes her constructivist metaethical view to imply that we're "forced to rethink normative truth and objectivity" (OT 38). We're forced to rethink

normative truth and objectivity because the only way to defend the idea that there are attitude-independent moral truths is to face the Darwinian Dilemma and its unappealing outcomes. That is, the consequence of (non-naturalist) realism is that each of us is likely hopeless at recognizing normative reasons, since realism offers no compelling way to understand how the causal forces we know have influenced our judgements would have led us to make *true* (in their sense) normative judgements. Street thinks the better alternative is that our own normative commitments are the source of normative truth. On her view, there is no longer a puzzling coincidence between Evaluative Truth and the evaluative judgements that causal forces led us to make, because “normative truth just *is* a (rather complex) function of the normative judgements that causal forces led us to make” (OT 12). Causal forces originally led us to affirm normative judgements such as “it is good to protect one's offspring” and the true normative judgements are those that withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of such judgements.⁵⁹ Thus to discover moral truth, “we merely explore what follows, as a matter of logical and instrumental consistency, from the standpoint of the normative convictions we already hold” (OT 12). We can preserve the objectivity of moral claims on Street's view because it is still possible to make errors when we act in ways that are inconsistent with our own values. However, since the standards of correctness are ultimately set by the normative judgements of the person whose reasons are in question, we are left with a less robust level of objectivity than the realist claims. Since this is all Street thinks is available to us, we're led to rethink normative truth and objectivity in the ways she suggests.

59 Note that Street may still be able to account for moral judgements that are less likely to have been influenced by causal evolutionary forces, such as the view that each person's interests count to some extent, by claiming that they are logically or instrumentally entailed from other judgements which are causally influenced. For example, upon reflection we may come to recognize that claims such as “it's good to protect one's offspring” entail that, if it is a good thing for everyone's offspring to be protected, and since parents cannot always be around to protect offspring, then perhaps a wider principle which protects each person's interests makes sense.

3.4 Problems with Street's account of moral truth & objectivity

3.4.1 Responses from debunking literature

Street's Darwinian Dilemma argument is an example of what's known as an “evolutionary debunking argument” (EDA). These types of arguments appeal to the evolutionary or causal origins of evaluative beliefs as a way to undermine or “debunk” their justification.⁶⁰ The typical evolutionary debunking thesis is that, if a moral belief that can be given an evolutionary explanation, then that belief does not count as moral knowledge (Wielenberg 2010:441). The basic structure of EDA's is fairly simple: they begin with a causal premise, which states that a particular belief is explained by a particular causal process; next comes an epistemic premise, explaining how this process is off-track; and from this follows the conclusion that the belief is unjustified (Kahane 2011:103-106). Street's argument follows this pattern: she begins by stating that selective pressures have likely influenced the content of moral beliefs, and then argues that natural selection is “off-track” in the sense that it does not track evaluative truth but rather what is adaptively beneficial. She then poses the dilemma: realists must either agree that moral beliefs do not track moral truth (with the skeptical result that most of our moral beliefs are unjustified) or offer a plausible tracking process to explain how evolutionary pressures may have led us to track normative truth. She claims that realism cannot offer a plausible tracking account, and concludes that the realist view of normative truth (that there are attitude-independent moral truths that we can have knowledge of) is unjustified.

Many of the responses to Street in the philosophical literature have focused on this dilemma and how it might be avoided, in particular by showing that realism can provide a successful tracking account. For example, David Copp argues that all realists need establish is that Darwinian forces “so affected our psychology that our moral beliefs tend to *quasi-track* the moral facts” (2008: 194). He purports to show that our moral

60 Other well-known examples of debunking accounts are given by M. Ruse, who argues that “morality is a collective illusion foisted upon us by our genes,” (1986:253), and R. Joyce, who argues that since we can give a non-moral (and evolutionary) genealogy of our moral concepts, they are explanatorily superfluous (2006). See also P. Kitcher (2011).

beliefs “tend to do *well enough* in tracking the moral truth that rational reflection can in principle correct sufficiently for any distorting influence so as to undermine the skeptical worry” (194). He proposes a “society-centered” theory of morality according to which a moral proposition is true only if the moral code that would best enable society to meet its needs for peaceful and cooperative behaviour includes or entails an authoritative moral norm corresponding to that proposition (199).⁶¹ Copp argues that evolutionary pressures would have led to the development of moral codes favouring behaviour that enhanced a society's ability to meet basic needs such as social stability, cooperation and peaceful relations. And since the society-centered theory of morality states that moral beliefs are true when they correspond to authoritative moral codes that promote a society's ability to meet its basic needs, this theory can explain why it is likely that our moral beliefs tend to “quasi-track” the moral truth. Moral codes that promoted basic needs such as survival and cooperation would have been adaptively advantageous, and moral claims made on the basis of these codes would have been true often enough for us to have tracked moral truth (202). Copp thus shows how someone might resist the dilemma as Street poses it by arguing that one can accept the tracking thesis (that realists must offer an account of how evaluative claims have tracked Evaluative Truth) yet disagree about what the nature of that tracking must be.⁶²

Since the Darwinian Dilemma part of Street's argument is not my focus, I won't evaluate the success of Copp's view in any detail. However, in a response to Copp's

61 For example, the moral proposition that torture is wrong would be true only if the moral code that would best serve the function of enabling society to meet its needs entailed a corresponding authoritative norm, such as a prohibition on torture.

62 Wielenberg similarly argues that realism can offer a plausible tracking account. He claims that the presence of certain cognitive faculties “both entail certain moral facts and causally contribute to the presence of moral beliefs that correspond to those moral facts” which makes it not at all unlikely that moral beliefs and moral facts will correspond (2010:459). Parfit has also argued that the same rational intuition that justifies our belief about non-observable features of the world such as mathematical and logical truths can lead us to recognize normative truths (2011:534-540). See also de Lazari-Radek and Singer's claim that our capacity to reason can explain how we evolved to recognize moral truths (2012:18); Skarsaune's claim that because evolution has caused us to value reproductively beneficial things by making us take pleasure in those things, and because pleasure is usually good, “there is a relation between reproductive enhancement and goodness after all” (2011:234); and David Enoch's argument that as long as the aims of survival and reproduction are by-and-large ones that normative truths recommend, then “our normative beliefs have developed to be at least somewhat in line with the normative truths” (2010:430).

criticism of her view, Street puts forward a challenge that relates to my critique of Parfit in the previous chapter, and which I think remains a fair challenge to realists who offer an alternate tracking account. I argued that relying on rational intuition of self-evident moral truths as a moral epistemology leaves the nature of foundational truths obscure, and explains little about which natural facts are reason-giving and why. Street makes a similar criticism of Copp, and states that rather than explaining the coincidence between independent normative truths and those that evolutionary causes pushed us to believe, his view “merely trivially reasserts the coincidence” (2008:214). For example, Copp simply stipulates that moral facts are “identical to certain ordinary natural facts having to do with the needs of societies” (203), and the moral codes which would best meet those needs. What is missing is an explanation of why moral facts are identical to certain ordinary facts; how do we know that meeting basic needs is morally right in an attitude-independent way that the realist claims? Copp's stipulation mirrors Parfit's assertion that certain moral truths are just so obvious that they cannot be doubted, such as the badness of pain. In his case, the missing piece is an explanation of how and when the fact that something seems obvious is sufficient to make it right.⁶³ Thus it seems to me that Street's challenge to Copp is warranted and extends to other realists who argue along similar lines: any successful tracking account will need to explain how any substantive starting assumptions are not simply the product of evolutionary pressures in order to evade Street's dilemma.⁶⁴ Without this further explanation, making such assumptions leaves the central problem intact: it claims that the moral claims that evolutionary pressures

63 For example, Parfit claims that even if some beliefs were produced by natural selection, they are not badly mistaken because “pain *is* bad, and we *do* have robust reasons to promote the survival and well-being of ourselves and our children” (OWM II: 533). Street claims that this is a “completely inadequate answer” because all it does is reassert the claim without explaining how we can know that our belief is not the result of evolutionary pressures (Forthcoming November 2016, 13).

64 For example, Wielenberg would need to explain why certain cognitive faculties and the moral claims these entail makes them morally justified, Skarsaune would need to explain how we know that pleasure is usually good in a way that is not caused by evolutionary forces, and Enoch would similarly need to give an account of why survival and reproduction are good apart from selective pressures that would have made us think so. My claim is not that these views are unable to meet the challenge, but that I think Street has put her finger on a crucial problem in their arguments: smuggling in substantive moral assumptions as a premise in their arguments, without giving a non-question begging account of those assumptions themselves.

influenced us to make tracked moral truth because we made particular judgements that happen to be true, but there is no explanation of why these particular judgements are true.

For now, I leave it an open question whether or not Street's Darwinian Dilemma argument can repel such replies. Even if it can, her positive view faces its own challenges, as I will argue in the next section. Interestingly, some of the criticisms of her constructivist account have adopted the strategy that Street criticizes Copp for: claiming that Street is overly pessimistic about what it is substantively rational to believe. Chappell argues along these lines. He notes that on Street's view, we might explain the accuracy of our moral beliefs in two ways: by offering a *substantive explanation* that presupposes some particular, substantive moral claims and showing how our mental faculties would lead us to believe those putative truths, or by offering a *constitutive explanation* that explains how our mental faculties can be reliable in virtue of general facts about this domain (Forthcoming, 10). Street's view is the latter type, arguing that normative facts are coherent outgrowths of our core practical commitments. Chappell notes that Street thinks that while constitutive explanations are epistemically legitimate, substantive ones are not, and calls this "Street's principle" (Forthcoming, 10). He argues that the moral realist should simply reject this principle, and admit that when we engage in wide reflective equilibrium, we are justified in appealing to all of our beliefs, including the particular substantive ones. The reason Chappell thinks we are justified to do this is that, contrary to Street's claims, we should not assign equal odds to the truth of every possible normative system. Recall that part of Street's argument is that without some explanation of how we might be sure that we are following the mind-independent Evaluative Truths, the odds that we're following such truths is extremely low. Chappell claims that we have "no antecedent inclination to assign equal odds to all possible normative systems" and that it's "overwhelmingly more likely that pain is intrinsically bad than that it's intrinsically good" (Forthcoming, 12). Thus his main criticism of Street's constructivist view is that, contrary to her claims, we can have substantive reasons for assigning higher odds to some normative beliefs than others, and not just constitutive reasons.

Parfit similarly briefly considers Street's anti-realist constructivist view, but doesn't examine her own account of moral truth in much detail for reasons similar to

Chappell's. That is, he doesn't take Street's claim that normative truths depend on our attitudes seriously because he thinks her reason for holding this view is mistaken: that we could have no way of recognizing attitude-independent normative truths (2011:531). Parfit argues that some of our normative beliefs (the foundational ones) can be justified in the same way that our mathematical and logical beliefs are, so that if we are confident of the latter, we can be confident about at least some of the former (2011: 539-540). Since I have examined this argument in the previous chapter, I won't do so again here. What is noteworthy is how little attention is paid to Street's own account of normative truth, presumably because realists such as Chappell and Parfit think that her starting premise is flawed.⁶⁵

I think it is worth considering Street's account of normative truth because she makes explicit the challenges that face any account that makes moral truth attitude-dependent, namely, that of retaining the authority of moral claims. I develop this argument in the section to follow. Her view is also worth considering because it may help us to see that perhaps the tendency to understand moral truth as either completely attitude-independent or completely attitude-dependent is too restrictive. I take up this claim in more detail in the next two chapters.

3.4.2 Personal consistency cannot account for normative truth

Street takes the success of her Darwinian Dilemma argument as central to her positive view about moral truth: if there is no good reason to believe that there are attitude-independent moral truths that our moral beliefs somehow “track,” then it seems that the only other option is that our evaluative attitudes are the source of moral truth. In this section, I argue that even if her Darwinian Dilemma argument succeeds, her view faces problems of its own in giving an account of moral truth. To see the difficulties that Street's view faces, it helps to clarify the connection between reasons and moral truth on her view. She understands normative claims to be reason-giving types of statements,

65 Alan Gibbard briefly examines Street's account of reasons, arguing that reasons for action are not always about personal integrity (2011:41, 42). I expand on his claim in the next section. However, like Chappell and Parfit, Gibbard focuses primarily on the Darwinian Dilemma, with the difference that he considers the threat this dilemma poses to quasi-realism.

which means that to say that someone ought to do something is to say that they have reasons to do it. However, since reasons can be understood only from a personal, practical standpoint on Street's view, a person's reasons for acting must come from their own normative standpoint. If a person lacks the particular value that would speak against a certain action, they do not have a reason to avoid that action. This means that there is a tight connection between a person's values and normative truth on Street's view: she claims that if something is not entailed by a person's own evaluative attitudes, then it is not a normative truth for that person (OT 2, WC 367). Explaining normative truth in terms of reasons, to say that it is *true* that a person has reasons to (ought to) do something is to say that this person truly does hold values entailing that action. Thus what makes a moral claim objective on Street's account is whether or not a person truly holds the relevant values, and whether those values truly entail the course of action called for by the moral claim.⁶⁶ This limitation imposed by individual values is what she refers to as the “less robust” form of objectivity that her view presents (OT 38).

The problem with this view of morality is that it does not fit with our moral discourse and practice. One of the desiderata of a plausible metaethical view is that it should explain or comport with the common and deeply held assumptions of ordinary moral discourse and practice, and there are a number of these assumptions that Street's fails to capture.⁶⁷ One of those assumptions is that facts about things other than our own values can give us reasons to act; in particular, we tend to treat facts about other people as reason-giving. It would sound very odd and wrong to say, for example, that child abuse is wrong because it conflicts with the values of the abuser; we typically take facts such as the negative effects abuse will have on a child's life and what it is like to suffer pain to be among the primary wrong-making features of child abuse.⁶⁸ While Street might say that

66 Note that Street claims a person can be wrong about what reasons they have, due to the incredibly complex range of evaluative judgements entailed by their values; in this way, evaluative truths can be objective in the sense that they may hold even if no one recognizes them. However, their truth will ultimately depend on a person's values, and not on any reasons that others might think they have.

67 Mark Timmons calls this the project of “internal accommodation,” since it aims to accommodate common-sense assumptions of moral discourse and practice; it is to be distinguished from external accommodation, which seeks to square our understanding of moral discourse and practice with broader scientific views of knowledge (1999:11-12).

68 Alan Gibbard similarly claims, in his discussion of Street's view, that my reason not to kick a dog is

we only take such facts to be reason-giving because we disapprove of hurting children, common moral discourse supports the opposite direction of inference: the facts about child abuse lead us to disapprove of it. Since facts like these are invariant with respect to individual attitudes (the ill effects of child abuse happen regardless of what anyone thinks of them), we don't tend to think that their reason-giving force depends entirely on how they connect with any particular individual's values.⁶⁹ The straight-forward way the claim “child abuse is wrong” is typically understood is that there are facts about child abuse that give anyone a reason not to do it. Facts about other people such as what basic respect for persons entails for all of us, or the significance of the impacts of our actions on others, are central to morality. A view which defines wrongness as failing to act in accord with one's values seems not to capture this central feature of morality.

To give a different example, we don't think that caring for one's child ceases to be a moral obligation if the parent is narcissistic and holds no values which entail caring behaviour. On Street's view we could regretfully but truthfully say that the narcissistic parent has no reason to care for her child. Yet we don't say this; we say things like, “she should care for her child regardless of how she feels, because that's what it is to be a parent” or “the ill effects of neglect on the life of her child give her reason to care for her child.”⁷⁰ We might feel sad that the parent doesn't care for her child, but we wouldn't

not that it goes against my own standards, but that it causes the dog pain (2011:41-42). He claims that reasons for action are not always about personal integrity but doesn't explain further; my view fills out this line of criticism by showing how Street's view does not fit with moral discourse and practice and fails to offer an inadequate view of moral truth.

69 Note that Street could object that I am merely begging the question by assuming that there are attitude-independent facts that can give us reasons, which is the realist view her Darwinian Dilemma argument showed to be flawed. Such facts cannot give us reasons on her view because her Darwinian Dilemma argument showed that there is no plausible way to explain how we are justified in knowing which facts have the property of being a reason. However, by pointing out the role that facts play in our moral discourse and practice, I am not intending to imply that I endorse the realist view of moral facts. There may be other ways to explain how we might be justified in thinking that facts can give us reasons, as my discussion of Horgan and Timmons view implies in the next chapter. For present purposes, all I am claiming is that our common moral discourse does not fit with her view that only facts which connect to personal values are reason-giving; I am not assuming any alternate view of facts and their relationship to reasons.

70 My observation that we rely on normative claims that appeal to facts other than personal values could be taken as evidence that I share Parfit and Chappell's view outlined above, that we seem warranted to

draw the further conclusion that there is nothing wrong with her actions. Even if we are simply trying to motivate her with our claims as Street suggests, or assume that she has values which would prohibit her behaviour, in everyday moral discourse the source of reasons is not limited to the values of the person we talk to. We speak as if and assume that we can have moral obligations to others quite apart from what our own values entail. Thus given how central we take facts about others to be to moral thought and practice, an account which makes their relevance depend entirely on values we already hold is missing a large part of morality.

Street could object at this point that even if our common moral discourse and practice seem to refer to facts other than personal values, her Darwinian Dilemma argument has shown that there is no plausible explanation for how facts can give us reasons unless they connect with values we already hold or would hold upon reflection. In this case, much as we might like to believe our common practice, it is simply misguided. However, this argument strategy relies on the assumption that there are only two options for moral truths: either they are mind-independent in the way that realists (both naturalist and non-naturalist versions) claim, or they are dependent in the way Street claims. Yet pointing out the difficulties that realist views face does not entail that Street's view wins by default; this would be true just if the options were limited to realism and Street's particular version of anti-realism. These are not the only two metaethical options, and as I will argue in the next chapter, there are other metaethical theories such as Horgan and Timmon's "cognitivist expressivism" that may better accommodate our moral discourse and practice (at least in some areas). But even if there were not currently other viable theoretical options, this wouldn't prevent us from concluding that since neither of the options make sense, perhaps we should take this as a sign that we're

hold some fundamental truths and appeal to them as a way of arguing against Street. However, the difference is that I don't share their view on why we might be justified to do this: I disagree that intuition of self-evident, fundamental truths is sufficient defense of an appeal to normative truths in metaethical theorizing. I do think that the kind of normative judgements made in common moral discourse need some explanation, but I don't think the options are limited to Street and Parfit's views. I elaborate on this point in the next chapter.

missing something. Thus a logical option that should not be over-looked is that perhaps both non-naturalist realism and Street's anti-realist constructivism are misguided.

For now, all that is needed to forestall Street's objection is to point out that if we take common moral discourse and practice seriously, which a plausible metaethical account should, a view which fails to capture this moral thought and practice is not best defended by pointing out flaws with other views. It is not a convincing defense of one's own view to say, "Well, theirs is worse;" the explanatory burden doesn't go away simply because the options seem limited. If the alternative to realism is a view which fails to accommodate a large part of our moral discourse and practice, then surely something has gone wrong and either our criticism of our rival is flawed or we ought to keep looking for a metaethical view that seems more plausible.⁷¹ Thus even if we find Street's Darwinian Dilemma argument compelling, her view will not seem like the only or best alternative if it fails to accord with common moral practice.

Street might further object that I've exaggerated the extent to which her view fails to accommodate moral practice. She might say that although it seems like facts about others are what gives us reasons, if we really stop and think about what's going on when we make moral claims, we'll see that personal values are the source of all of our reasons for acting and thus that her view can accommodate our common practice more than I have claimed. For example, the child abuse example may be compelling because most people have compassion toward children and value their well-being; thus for most

71 Of course, another option is that common moral discourse and practice is massively mistaken; as outlined in the introduction, error theorists such as Mackie and Joyce have argued along these lines. Other theorists like Sidgwick have argued that while common-sense morality works well enough for everyday life, attempts to systematize it reveal that it is contradictory and mistaken (*The Methods of Ethics*, ch.11). Given these criticisms of common-sense morality, one could question the importance I give to having a metaethical view which can accommodate everyday moral practice. Nonetheless, I tend to agree with those who think that we should assume that things are roughly as they appear until proven otherwise (see Huemer 2005:99-122 and Shafer-Landau 2003:231-246 for arguments to this effect). If the views put forward to explain ubiquitous moral practice seem implausible on many fronts, this speaks against them. However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, I don't think moral realism offers the account that best fits with the assumptions that seem part of ordinary moral practice. My argument against Street should therefore not be assumed to be an argument in favor of moral realism, but the more limited claim that *any* account (including realism) which makes claims that are difficult to square with moral practice owes us an explanation that does not rely heavily on pointing out how flawed rival views are.

people, child abuse *is* wrong. In other words, it may well be that what makes the facts about child abuse seem reason-giving is that most of us already hold values that prohibit it; the fact that we personally value the well-being of children is thus what makes us care about such facts in the first place. If so, the child abuse example doesn't show that facts about other people can give us reasons, but that some values are so widely held that they make some moral claims practically universal. There is some force to this objection, because in trying to convince someone that they have reasons not to abuse a child regardless of their own values, it's true that we are likely to resort in the end to an appeal to their values. We might tell them that even if they didn't care about children, they should not abuse a child because it's awful to be in pain, and they wouldn't want to be in pain themselves. In other words, we often appeal to a person's own values as a final attempt at convincing them, which supports Street's claim that reasons for acting ultimately depend on personal values. And making this kind of appeal is to engage in exactly what Street says we do in making normative claims: appeal to values a person already holds, and point out what follows from them. If this is the case, then rather than showing that facts about others can give us normative reasons, the child abuse example simply demonstrates just how far Street's view will get us—it shows that most people value the well-being of children, which allows us to say with confidence to those around us, “you should not abuse children.” In this way, Street's view can accommodate moral practice by showing that even when we refer to facts about others, our reason for doing so is because we already hold values that make us care about such facts to begin with.

To be fair, it's true that on a surface level, Street's view allows us to continue making most of the moral claims that we make now. In this sense, her view does quite well at accommodating everyday moral practice: since humans are so similar in most of the relevant respects, we'll end up being able to sensibly tell each other that it's wrong to abuse a child, or harm the environment, or support factory farming. And we'll be able to list the facts about these acts as reason-giving because the wide background of shared assumptions will ensure that those we talk to have enough of the relevant values to make our claims normative. Nonetheless, although Street's view may leave much of our moral practice undisturbed, it does so only by chance—it is only because so many of us happen to share values that we can make the claims that we do. Such a contingent view of values

makes moral truth problematic, and means that there are still some features of moral discourse and practice that her view cannot accommodate.

It is implausible to say, for example, that what makes the normative claim “you should not abuse children” true is that the person this claim is addressed to really does have personal values that prohibit it. We don't typically think we need to examine the values of the person to whom a normative claim is addressed in order to find out whether the claim is true.⁷² To do so would make the truth of normative claims highly contingent, dependent on whatever values a person happened to have; it would mean that despite all of the horrible effects of child abuse, we couldn't say whether or not it was bad until we knew whether a person's values prohibited it. This doesn't fit the way moral claims are used or understood at all. Moral claims are usually understood to apply to everyone regardless of their personal values; they are not given in hypothetical form, such that *if* a person cared about child abuse, *then* they should act in a certain way. Moral claims are understood as categorical, which means that they are unconditional and absolute, not dependent on our own motives or values. This is why we don't stop to examine the values of those we debate with: the default assumption is that they apply to everyone unless shown otherwise. Thus we take ourselves to be justified in saying that the facts about child abuse give everyone a reason not to do it, regardless of their values, and we don't wait to make such claims until we have scrutinized the values of those we speak to. This suggests that there is not the tight connection between normative truth and personal values that Street posits. To say that a moral claim is true only if your values prohibit it seriously conflicts with our practice by making moral truth relative to each individual, and diminishes the authority of moral claims considerably.

This is especially true given that the initial selection of values is arbitrary on Street's view. In the thought experiment with the first valuing creatures, Street holds that they wouldn't have been mistaken to value their own destruction or suffering, they would

72 Of course, this tells us nothing about what does make a moral claim true; that is a contentious matter which cannot be addressed in any detail here. For present purposes, the point is that examination of personal values is surely not the only or best way to discover moral truth, given all of the other kinds of facts that seem to be reason-giving.

only be mistaken to act inconsistently with this value. Interpreting moral claims in this way would seriously diminish the respect that we give them; it's hard to see why we would take them that seriously, when the values that make them wrong are themselves completely arbitrary. Why treat our values as authoritative, if we have no reason to choose one value or another to begin with? Such apathy does not fit with our moral experience. When we say that child abuse is wrong, we understand ourselves to be saying that even if a person doesn't hold any value prohibiting abuse, they *should* hold such a value; if they don't care, they *ought* to. And this normative part doesn't go away even when we resort to appealing to a person's own values in order to convince them; if a person bizarrely didn't care if they suffered abuse themselves, and so had no compassion for those who do, we would not simply give up and say "oh well, I guess it's okay for you to abuse a child, then." Out of sadness for their lack of self-love and compassion, we would presumably try to show them their own value as a basis for caring about others, among other things. Thus to say that a person has a reason is not to say that a person *currently* holds a particular value, but that certain facts make it the case that they *should* hold that value. We treat moral claims as authoritative regardless of the values any person happens to have. Thus Street's proposal to limit normative truth to what is entailed from within each person's practical point of view fails to capture the authority and respect that we typically grant to moral claims.⁷³

73 A question which naturally arises in response to Street's view is, does she think that our choice of metaethical views is itself arbitrary? That is, since her view makes value relative to each individual, and values are not chosen for any reason, might the choice of her own view be similarly arbitrary? It is difficult to know how Street might respond to such questions, since she does not address them directly as far as I can tell. The closest she comes is when she says that her view does rely on any substantive views about reasons but merely observes "what is constitutively involved in making a normative judgement in the first place" (CR 28). My best guess as to how she would answer these questions is thus that she would say that the choice of her view as the correct or right metaethical view would not be arbitrary because of what is constitutively involved in taking oneself to have reasons: absent a compelling rival account of what it is to make normative judgements, hers is the best because it most accurately explains what it is to have normative reasons. But since notions like "best account" are themselves normative, more would need to be said to clarify how the choice of metaethical view is not itself relative to each individual. In this case, it's difficult to see why one might not be justified in adopting an entirely different metaethical view than Street's if one valued different things.

3.4.3 Problematic consequences of Street's view of truth

One of the problematic consequences of Street's view is that it makes moral disagreement difficult in a number of ways. First of all, it changes the nature of moral disagreement from rational, honest argument over what we have most reason to do based on a wide range of considerations to rhetorical persuasion. This can be seen in Street's discussion of ICEs, where she claims that we are technically speaking falsely if we say to someone such as an ideally coherent Caligula that he shouldn't torture others. Such a claim is false because Caligula has no values that prohibit torture. Street thinks we are nonetheless justified (from our own point of view) in telling him he acts wrongly because of the hope that our words will cause him to stop torturing others. Again, while such characters are too impossible to be of much relevance to our discussion, her claims are not just applicable to ICEs. If the reason our claim is false is that Caligula doesn't hold the requisite values, then it follows that any time our moral interlocutors do not hold the values from which our moral claims are entailed, we engage in double-speak: we say that they should do something that technically, they have no reason to do. In other words, Street's view implies that we can only criticize someone's actions when they act inconsistently with their own values; to do so otherwise is to speak falsely.⁷⁴ But even if it is true that most of the time, we will hold enough values in common to have genuine moral disagreement and thus avoid this double-speak, it goes against the way moral claims are typically understood to say that we speak *falsely* in criticizing someone who does not share our values. As the child abuse example shows, we assume that we can rightly criticize someone because of the effect their actions have on another human being. We are thus not speaking falsely to say that they act wrongly in harming a child. Making moral criticism depend on the values a person currently holds misses much of what moral disagreement is all about, namely what the facts about others may legitimately require of

74 To be clear, her view allows for criticizing each other's actions, it's just that the standards for that criticism will be the person in question's own values, not that of the speaker. And this doesn't mean that each individual can simply trump moral disagreement on a whim, since Street thinks that there is a fact of the matter about what a person's values entail, a fact that others can (at least sometimes) just as easily point out as we can (CR 28).

us. It demotes moral disagreement from authoritative claims to reminders to each other about how live consistently with our own values.

In addition, Street's view misses the fact that moral disagreement often involves attempting to convince each other to adopt new values or drop old ones, or deciding which of two conflicting values to drop. Street does not give these aspects of moral disagreement nearly enough attention, but focuses almost exclusively on the way in which acting consistently with the values we already hold will yield all of the moral claims that matter; the process of adopting new values is hardly discussed at all. This seems to be because what any person decides to value on her view is not as important as what those values entail. This makes sense, given how individual she understands the source of values and normativity to be. Recall her claim that our initial choice in values is neither wrong nor right, but that once we have chosen values, evaluative standards are entailed from these values. Yet in our experience of morality, failure to locate the relevant value in ourselves or another person does not make moral claims go away; if a person lacks the value that makes something like child abuse wrong, our response would likely be, "well, then you should change your values!" Moral disagreement and debate is typically about what the facts about a situation give us reasons to do, not about what our own values entail. Thus Street's view fails to capture the role of values in moral disagreement.

Street might object that the values that most of us learn early on (even simple ones such as "harming others is wrong" and "protecting and promoting life is good") are sufficiently broad to capture the vast majority of normative claims that we typically make. This means that the need or chance to adopt genuinely new values will be extraordinarily rare. Thus her claim that a person has no reasons until the moment she starts taking herself to have reasons probably only applied to the hypothetical first valuers described earlier. For these early humans, taking oneself to have reasons of any kind was a radical choice, and not one that could be made for any reason at all; but as soon as these people began to value certain things over others, they began to set up standards for themselves and have reasons to act in particular ways (CR 35). The choice to begin valuing in the first place is not one a person can make for a reason, on Street's view, but

valuing is so much a part of being human that all of us are already engaged in the activity of valuing long before we're aware of doing so. In a sense, no one is ever really in a position to adopt values *ex nihilo*, since we are already engaged in the activity of valuing by the time we have the ability to reflect and choose values. In a footnote, she clarifies that she does not mean to imply that “one is saddled with whatever values one comes alive with” (CR 36, footnote 50). Rather, any of us can throw out any of these or adopt new ones at any time and be justified in doing so, it’s just that we will be justified because doing so is called for by other values that we already hold. And since we are almost never going to be in a situation where we have to adopt entirely new values, moral disagreement won't pose the problem I claim it does, since we can be confident that our interlocutors hold the relevant values.

However, Street's claim that reasons are not involved in choosing values in the first place diminishes the weight she gives to reasons in her account of normativity. For one thing, since we learn to value the things our parents value far before we have a chance to think critically about these values, and have all kinds of other influences such as extended family and school, it seems like we are saddled with the values we grow up with, contrary to Street's claim. This is a somewhat depressing view of morality: most of the moral claims we make will be based on the values we grew up with, not on the reasons we might think support such claims. It seems unnecessarily restrictive to say that our choices in adopting new values as an adult are limited to finding some inconsistency with the values we learned from our parents. What's missing is the process of rational deliberation which typically accompanies the process of adopting new values or dropping old ones, quite apart from the values we may happen to hold, and which we rely on to justify these choices. Given that Street understands normative claims as reason-giving claims, it's a bit puzzling that she understands the process of adopting new values (the source of all reasons on her view) as itself an a-rational and arbitrary process.

As a consequence, the nature of value is a bit mysterious on Street's view; value simply arrives on the scene. This is especially ironic considering that one of her criticisms of Dworkin is that his view leaves moral knowledge mysterious because all we can say to those who do not agree with us morally is that they fail to “see” or “sense”

what we do (OT 20-21). Street's view may be less mysterious when it comes to moral knowledge, since we come to know what we ought to do by figuring out what actions our values entail, but her view is equally mysterious as to how we get the values in the first place. This mysteriousness may affect moral disagreement more than Street is willing to admit; people from very different cultures may have a hard time finding sufficient values in common to be able to justifiably challenge each other's actions. It seems likely that there will be times when we are challenged to adopt entirely new values or drop old ones, or decide which of two competing values is the more important to uphold. In these cases, Street's view will offer little guidance, since she thinks that we do not ever choose values for any reason other than it being entailed by values we already hold.

3.5 Conclusion

Street argues that normative truth can be adequately captured by considering what is entailed from within each individual's practical point of view. She thinks that since it is unclear how we could have knowledge about mind-independent Evaluative Truths, the better explanation of normative claims is that they are mind-dependent. They emerge from the act of valuing, and from the normative commitments that these values entail for each individual. I find her claims unconvincing. Personal values and the normative claims they entail are not adequate to capture what happens in everyday moral discourse and practice, in particular because we do not typically take personal values to be the only source of reasons for acting. We think that facts about other people play a central role in giving us reasons, and an account of morality that leaves these out is missing a central part of morality. The consequences of restricting normativity to personal values are also problematic. Moral disagreement gets reduced to pointing out logical flaws in each other's reasoning, and the nature of value remains mysterious on her view. For these reasons, Street's account of moral truth and objectivity is unconvincing.

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4 Cognitivist Expressivism and “small ‘o’ objectivity”

4.1 Introduction

A well-known contention within metaethics is that moral realism, and cognitivism more broadly, can best account for the “objective pretensions” of ordinary moral discourse. Cognitivism is roughly the view that claims within a particular domain assert propositions that are true or false in virtue of whether or not they accurately represent the facts within that domain. Moral realism is a form of cognitivism because it holds that there are objective moral facts and that moral claims are true to the degree that they correctly report or represent these facts (Shafer-Landau, 2003:17). Moral realism is seen to provide the most straight-forward explanation for why we can sensibly talk about moral claims being true or false, why we have experiences such as 'recognizing' that something is wrong, and how we can argue about whether or not a course of action is right: there are objective moral facts that such discourse and behaviour refer to.⁷⁵ For example, on a realist view, the most obvious way to understand the evaluative claim “pleasure is good” is that there is a property of goodness that we are ascribing to pleasure. The usual conclusion drawn by defenders of moral realism is that this superior ability to make sense of everyday moral thought and practice counts in its favor.

Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons challenge this view, arguing that closer inspection of moral thought and practice (and moral phenomenology in particular) does not support a strong realist view in the way many suppose. They claim that moral facts as the realist construes them are problematic; for example, they argue that realists of the naturalist variety face the difficulty of picking out unique natural properties to which moral terms supposedly refer (MWMF 226)⁷⁶. They also argue that the constructivist view of moral facts is flawed because moral facts are supposed to be the outcome of

75 See Shafer-Landau's argument to this effect in 2003: 23-38, as well as Huemer 2005: 17-25.

76 “Morality Without Moral Facts,” in ed. James Dreier (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*, 220-238. Hereafter abbreviated as MWMF.

some ideal process of deliberation, yet such processes inevitably seem to rely on substantive assumptions about moral facts to determine what counts as an “ideal” process (MWMF 227). They propose that their Cognitive Expressivism can successfully accommodate moral phenomena without reference to putative moral facts, and offer a defense of “morality without moral facts.” According to Cognitivist Expressivism, moral claims are objective to the extent that they bind independently of our desires, and because we make them in an impartial, nonarbitrary, reason-based way. Thus they see their view as preserving “small 'o' objectivity” in the sense that objectivity is not tied to objective moral facts that our moral claims represent, but to the impartial reasons we give for moral claims and the authoritative role they play in moral deliberation.

In this chapter, I examine Horgan and Timmons' Cognitivist Expressivism (CE) and offer both a commendation and a criticism. My commendation is that their view of the authoritative role of reasons nicely captures the role reasons play in everyday moral deliberation: when we defend the truth of our moral claims, why we think they're “really” or truly right, we appeal to reasons. This makes their proposed connection between reasons and moral objectivity promising. In particular, it offers a way of explaining the objectivity of morality without reference to non-natural moral facts, yet without reducing moral truth to facts about what a person happens to prefer or value. Nonetheless, CE also faces difficulties. Their view of truth makes it unclear how moral progress is possible; if claims about moral truth are always themselves normative claims made on the basis of nonmoral facts and the reasons we think these give us to act, this pushes the justificatory burden back onto reasons and we thus need a way of judging what count as good or authoritative reasons. In addition, they appear to conflate moral phenomenology with normativity by claiming that the distinctive experiential character of moral reasons constitutes a fundamental form of moral objectivity. Without an account of what counts as a good or authoritative reason, their view implies that a claim is objective as long as it feels that way, which opens up their view to a form of relativism. Since the role of reasons is a central issue at stake in questions about objectivity in everyday moral discourse and practice, and Horgan and Timmons offer little to explain how reasons can be authoritative, their view cannot accommodate the phenomena in the way they propose. In the end, CE does not offer a persuasive account of moral objectivity.

4.2 Cognitivist Expressivism: morality without moral facts

Horgan and Timmons defend a metaethical view that they call “Cognitivist Expressivism.” This combination of terms is somewhat unusual, as expressivism has typically been understood to go hand in hand with noncognitivism. Noncognitivism is a metaethical view that holds that the primary function of moral language is to express noncognitive attitudes (such as emotions or preferences) rather than to assert beliefs. The emotivism of Ayer and C.L. Stevenson is one example, and R.M. Hare's prescriptivism is another. The reason these views are considered noncognitive is that neither expressions of emotion nor imperatives seem to be capable of truth and falsity in the way that beliefs can: an expression of dismay or a command not to do something is not capable of truth or falsity. One of the primary complaints against noncognitivist views has been that they do not fit very well with moral thought and discourse, especially the fact that we treat moral judgements as capable of truth or falsity. For many, the fact that moral judgements do seem to have cognitive content prevents them from being understood merely as expressions of attitudes.

More recent versions of expressivism such as Horgan and Timmons' Cognitivist Expressivism (CE for short) seek to reject noncognitivism while remaining expressivist. Horgan and Timmons deny that their version of expressivism entails non-cognitivism by challenging a key assumption that they think is responsible for the (assumed) tight connection between expressivism and noncognitivism. They call this the 'semantic assumption,' which is that all cognitive content (i.e. belief-eligible, assertible, truth-apt content) is descriptive content, with the consequence that “all genuine beliefs and all genuine assertions purport to represent or describe the world” (CE, 256)⁷⁷. This assumption has tied expressivism to noncognitivism in the past because expressivism interprets moral claims not as descriptions of moral facts, but as expressions of pro-attitudes. Thus if all cognitive content is assumed to be descriptive, expressivism is necessarily noncognitive. Horgan and Timmons argue that this assumption has been

77 “Cognitivist Expressivism,” in *Metaethics after Moore*, ed. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, hereafter abbreviated as CE.

widely taken for granted in metaethics and that it is false. They claim that if this assumption is challenged, a new metaethical option opens up.

The new possibility that Horgan and Timmons argue for is that moral judgements are genuine truth-apt beliefs but that they are not descriptive. Their argument can be summarized in three parts: first, they argue that since moral judgements exhibit certain generic features that are characteristic of all beliefs, they count as genuine beliefs. They take this first premise to establish that their view is cognitivist, since they agree that like other beliefs, moral beliefs are truth-apt. Second, they propose that despite counting as genuine beliefs, moral beliefs are a unique type of belief with evaluative rather than descriptive content. This second premise clarifies the way in which their view is expressivist, since they retain the view that moral claims express attitudes whose primary intent is not to describe or represent some moral reality, but to evaluate and recommend a course of action (MWMF, 233). Third, they argue that their view can successfully accommodate the various common features of moral phenomenology, such as the “objective pretensions” of moral thought and discourse.

Expanding on the first premise, one kind of generic feature that moral and non-moral beliefs share is their phenomenology. The phenomenology of beliefs is the subjective, “what-it-is-like” experiential aspect of occurrent beliefs, captured in five interrelated features: (1) psychologically 'coming down' on some issue, which involves (2) classifying or sorting some 'object' of focus as falling under some category, where this classificatory coming down is (3) involuntary, and is (4) a cognitive response to some sort of consideration that is experienced as being a sufficient reason for one's categorizing, and is also (5) a judgement that is apt for assertion and expressed in the declarative mood (CE, 263).

In both moral and non-moral cases, the experience of 'coming down' on some issue can be preceded by some thought and reflection, or it can be experienced as an automatic response to one's surroundings. For example, a person might be examining the night sky and decide after some time that the bright celestial object is Mars, or they might catch a glimpse of a moving object in their periphery vision and immediately judge that it

is a car. Similarly, coming down with respect to a moral issue may be preceded by deliberation, as when listening to opposing views about same-sex marriage convinces someone to adopt the view that there is nothing morally wrong with such marriages. Other experiences of coming down on a moral issue happen spontaneously, such as the immediate judgement that the person kicking her dog is doing something wrong. Horgan and Timmons propose that these experiences of ‘coming down’ on are also distinctive in that they involve a second feature, classifying the object of one's belief and sorting it into experiential categories depending on the kind of belief. They write that “in the case of descriptive beliefs, things get sorted experientially into descriptive categories, via category-concepts that purport to represent some worldly object-kind or some property” (CE, 264). Thus the experience of recognizing Mars in the night sky might involve sorting our belief into the descriptive category of celestial objects. Similarly, when we make a moral judgement that some act ought not to be done, “a particular act-type or act-token gets sorted experientially into the category of those actions that one is not to perform” (CE, 264). The judgement that it’s wrong to kick a dog thus gets sorted into the category of actions one should not perform. At this point in their argument they have not explained the difference between descriptive and evaluative beliefs on their view, but seek to highlight the sorting or categorizing aspect that they think is “central to the phenomenology of belief” (CE, 264).⁷⁸

The third phenomenological feature of beliefs is their involuntariness, or the sense that one's belief must be the case. Sometimes the involuntary nature of beliefs goes along with their spontaneity, as when one looks out the window and spontaneously and involuntarily believes that the sun is shining, or when one sees a dog being kicked and

78 Note that Horgan and Timmons claim that beliefs get sorted experientially, and that descriptive beliefs get sorted into a different category than moral beliefs, appears to presuppose a central feature of their view: that moral beliefs are a different, distinct kind of belief and that their distinguishing feature is that they are not descriptive. In other words, their explanation of the phenomenology of moral belief presumes that moral beliefs are not descriptive, and thus appears question-begging. One could agree that beliefs seem to get categorized experientially in some way, yet think that there is a separate descriptive category for moral beliefs; categorizing moral and non-moral beliefs differently doesn't necessarily imply that one is descriptive, and one is not. Since the authors do not explain why they think moral beliefs are not descriptive until further in their argument, they cannot use the distinction here as evidence for their claim that moral beliefs share enough features with other types of beliefs to count as genuine.

immediately judges it to be wrong. However, one's involuntarily coming down on an issue may also be preceded by reflection; the involuntary part is meant to capture the sense of finding oneself arriving at the conviction that something simply must be the case in light of the evidence. The judgement that same-sex marriages are morally permissible may be involuntary in that after reviewing the facts, a person involuntarily concludes that it is wrong.

A fourth experiential feature of beliefs is that they are experienced as possessing a kind of rational authority, consisting in being grounded in reasons. In the case of ordinary non-moral beliefs about objects and their properties, this authority comes from one's perceptual experiences—the smooth feel of the desk when I run my hand across its surface leads to my spontaneous belief that the desk is smooth (CE, 264). I experience these perceptual facts (the smooth feel of the desk) as constituting rationally compelling evidence that a potential state of affairs actually obtains, and my subsequent belief is typically involuntary—I feel compelled to judge that the desk is smooth because my senses tell me so (MWMF, 232, CE 264). Horgan and Timmons claim that “one's reasons for an ought-commitment normally are related to the commitment's involuntariness in a similar way, experientially: an awareness of those facts *as reasons* for a moral judgment involves a *felt moral-normative authority* that the reason exerts upon oneself...a felt authority in virtue of which the ought-commitment with respect to that state of affairs arises involuntarily” (MWMF, 232). They think this rational authority is grounded in the nonmoral factual considerations that we experience as grounding our moral claims (CE, 265, 286). Horgan and Timmons expand on this rational authority when they explain how moral beliefs are distinct from non-moral ones, which I discuss below, but for now the idea seems to be something like, I see the hoodlums lighting the cat on fire and immediately judge that this action is wrong because the facts about such an act (such as the suffering the cat experiences) seem to provide immediate, compelling evidence against this act (i.e. these facts give me a reason not to do it). The authors claim that these factual considerations that we experience as giving us rational grounds for our moral judgements explain why “it is not 'up to' an individual what to think about some matter of moral concern, just as it is not 'up to' someone what to think about some nonmoral factual matter of concern” (CE, 265). In both cases, certain factual considerations compel us to

form beliefs regardless of our individual preferences or desires. Fifth and finally, beliefs are experienced as apt for assertion, as things a person can naturally and spontaneously express in the declarative mood. One states that the sun is shining, and that it is wrong to kick a dog.

In addition to phenomenology, a second feature that beliefs about both moral and nonmoral matters share is semantic assessability. Just we assess our belief that the sun is shining to be true or false depending on the evidence, so it is grammatically permissible and common in practice to ascribe truth or falsity to moral judgements and statements. We say that it's true that people ought not to kick their dogs. A third and final feature of beliefs is that both moral and nonmoral beliefs can play a rational-inferential functional role: they combine in distinctive ways with other beliefs or psychological states to rationally-inferentially yield further content-appropriate states as well as action. For example, one's belief that there is an ice-cream shop around the corner may combine with one's desire to eat ice-cream to yield the intention to go and get ice-cream on one's coffee break (CE, 266). Similarly, if I believe that I ought to help those in need and I have the further belief that my friend is in need, then it is appropriate and expected that I will come to the logical conclusion that I ought to help my friend (MWMF, 232). On the face of it, the fact that moral judgements can figure in logical inferences like other kinds of beliefs suggests that they are also beliefs.

However, moral beliefs are also unlike other beliefs in two important ways. Moral beliefs have a distinct phenomenological characteristic: they involve a "felt demand" on one's behaviour. This felt demand is a complex phenomenon involving the experience of an *origin* and a *direction*. When I judge that an action is morally obligatory for me, I experience a felt demand that issues from the circumstances that I face; as described above, certain facts about a situation seem to compel me to draw certain conclusions, and I thus experience the demand's origin as external to myself. While one's own desires can also be the source of a felt demand for action, the demandingness of moral judgement is distinct in that it comes not from one's own desires or preferences but from the morally

relevant facts of the circumstances in which one finds oneself.⁷⁹ Horgan and Timmons claim that it is this external demand that constitutes the manner in which moral beliefs are experienced as being grounded in 'objective' reasons. On their view, objective reasons are those grounded in factual considerations that exert a felt demand upon our behaviour; they are objective because their source is external to us (i.e. not our own desires) and because we experience them as demanding or compelling us to do something (CE, 268). Whether directed at oneself or someone else, the origin of moral beliefs is experienced as external.⁸⁰

Moral beliefs are also different from other beliefs in that they play a motivationally “hot” functional role: they have “motivational force in and of themselves, apart from any pre-existing desires or other 'pro-attitudes'” (CE, 269). Moral judgements seem to be compelling quite apart from, and even in spite of, one's desires. By contrast, non-moral descriptive beliefs are only action-guiding in combination with some prior desire or aversion (MWMF, 233). For example, the belief that there is a fire in the vicinity will not orient you toward any particular action unless it is combined with a further desire; if you have a strong aversion to fires you'll want to get away, but if you

79 Horgan and Timmons use of phrases like “morally relevant facts of the circumstances” or “factual considerations” that ground one's moral judgment is confusing because they explicitly deny that there are “specifically *moral* facts that moral judgements purport to describe or represent” (MWMF, 220). The factual considerations that they have in mind here therefore seem to be non-moral facts about a situation, which we judge to be morally relevant, not moral facts which we recognize and respond to. Evidence for this is their claim that “enquiry into those nonmoral factual concerns that serve as good reasons for accepting or denying moral statements is what moral thinking is all about” (CE, 286). The difference is subtle but important: on their view, moral beliefs do not describe moral facts that are features of the world, there to be recognized like any other feature. Rather, moral beliefs are evaluations about what we ought to do, based on non-moral factual considerations. This raises a question of where norms and normativity come in: what is it about certain non-moral facts that makes me feel compelled to draw a certain moral conclusion? Where does this normativity come from, if there are no moral facts? I address these questions in more detail in the second half of the chapter.

80 The authors do not explain how we would tell whether a felt demand is external or internal, and it is difficult to imagine how we could tell these apart in our experience. For example, in the case of seeing hoodlums light a cat on fire, it would be difficult to tell whether my immediate judgement that this kind of act is wrong issues from my own desire not to see animals hurt (maybe because I had a cat as a child and have developed empathy for cats) or whether the felt demand comes from the non-moral facts of the situation, such as the fact that the cat is feeling a significant degree of pain. The reality seems to be that our responses involve both, and it would be difficult to separate these elements or to tell when we are rightfully judging that we have objective reasons, and when we are wrongly judging, and in fact are acting out of our own desires (say, to stay true to our love for cats).

happen to have a fascination with fires, you might be motivated to see how close you can get to check out the fire (MWMF, 233). In contrast, moral beliefs have motivational force in and of themselves, regardless of any pre-existing desires or other kinds of 'pro-attitudes' (CE, 269). For example, the moral judgement that I ought not to put myself in harm's way necessarily motivates me to avoid the location of the fire regardless of whether I'd like to see the fire or not. Since moral beliefs have this distinctive motivational, action-guiding role, Horgan and Timmons take this to indicate that they are a distinct kind of belief.

What kind of belief might moral judgments be, then? Horgan and Timmons turn to the second part of their argument, the task of providing a general framework for moral belief and explaining why they reject the semantic assumption that beliefs must be descriptive in order to have cognitive content. They define belief as a commitment state toward a core descriptive content, and propose that there are two logically fundamental belief types about this core descriptive content: is-commitments, and ought-commitments (CE, 270). For example, a core descriptive content might be *that Justin Trudeau is Prime Minister of Canada*, and an is-commitment would be the belief that *it is the case that Justin Trudeau is Prime Minister of Canada*, while an ought-commitment would be the belief that he *ought* to be in this role rather than Stephen Harper. Thus both moral and non-moral beliefs can share a core descriptive content, yet the overall content of each belief will differ because in the "ought" case, an evaluative component is added. The overall content of evaluative or ought-commitments is that something *ought* to be the case, while the overall content of descriptive or is-commitment is that something simply *is* the case. In the example above, the non-moral belief that Justin Trudeau is the Prime Minister of Canada expresses a commitment to a certain way the world *is* (where Justin Trudeau is prime minister) but says nothing about whether it is a good thing or not to have him in this role. By contrast, the evaluative claim that he ought to have this role expresses the commitment that he *should* be the Prime Minister, i.e. that there are compelling reasons to believe so. Non-moral beliefs describe a way that the world is, while evaluative beliefs tell us whether a certain state of affairs is as it should be.

Horgan and Timmons urge that the temptation to assimilate ought-beliefs to is-beliefs, or to non-belief states expressible as nondeclarative utterances, should be resisted and can be, once the semantic assumption is given up. Beliefs about what *ought* to be the case are different than beliefs about what *is* the case because their job is different: the primary role of moral beliefs is “reasoned action-guidance” (MWMF, 233), the business of evaluating different courses of action or attitudes as worth pursuing or avoiding. Since their primary purpose is not describing the way things are but evaluating whether it should be that way or not, moral beliefs should be taken as a distinct type of belief on their own. The added piece of recommending a particular course of action makes them fundamentally different from purely descriptive beliefs. The uniquely motivational, action-guiding nature of moral belief supports the claim that they are distinct from descriptive beliefs.

However, the challenge remains of explaining what it could mean for the contents of beliefs to be non-descriptive. Do the generic phenomenological, semantic, and functional features of beliefs outlined above fit non-descriptive content? Horgan and Timmons think they do. The experiencing of coming down on an issue and classifying an action as something one ought to do (or not do) can be explained as an expression of an affirmatory commitment that a person now has with respect to a particular descriptive content, rather than an attribution of an in-the-world moral property to an act, agent, or state of affairs (CE, 272). For example, the experience of coming-down against kicking a dog and classifying it as wrong can just as well be explained as expressing my commitment to not kicking dogs based on the relevant facts about dog-kicking as it can a description of the wrongness property of kicking dogs. Thus the phenomenal experience of involuntarily coming-down on an issue and classifying an action as something one ought or ought not to do does not seem to be tied to a descriptive explanation.

In addition, the experience of beliefs as possessing rational authority is not limited to descriptive content. This is because one's moral belief can be rationally grounded in descriptive (non-moral) considerations, even though the overall content of the belief is not descriptive. The moral claim that kicking dogs is wrong is evaluative, yet is rationally grounded in non-moral descriptive facts about the situation, such as facts about what it is

like for dogs to be kicked. Finally, ought-beliefs can be apt for assertion and expressible in the declarative mood despite not being descriptive in overall content because of their involuntarily classificatory nature and experienced authority (CE, 272). Horgan and Timmons don't explain this point in any detail, but the idea seems to be that evaluative content ("what he did was wrong") is apt for assertion just as descriptive content ("the sky is a deep blue colour") because to believe something is to assert it on the basis of factual considerations that we take to give us reasons, and both belief-types rely for their authority on these factual considerations, as explained above. Horgan and Timmons conclude that the phenomenological features that moral beliefs have in common with non-moral beliefs do not necessarily build descriptivity into moral judgment.

If moral judgments are genuine beliefs, Horgan and Timmon's view must also be able to explain the feature of semantic assessability: can moral beliefs be assessed as true or false even if their content is not descriptive? This is a particularly important and challenging feature of beliefs to accommodate, since CE holds that "there are no in-the-world moral facts that could serve as truth-makers for moral beliefs and assertions" (CE, 275). On a descriptive view, moral judgements are true when they accurately represent or describe moral facts or properties; if according to CE there are no facts to appeal to as truth-makers, what can be used to assess whether a moral claim is true? Horgan and Timmons propose a contextualist approach to moral semantics according to which the truth of a moral claim is a matter of its correct assertibility, which they define as the complex interaction of two factors: the norms and practices that govern a particular mode of discourse, and the relevant relationship to the world (such as any objects, properties, etc.) that affect assertibility. A key difference between this contextual approach to moral truth and a correspondence approach relied on by realists of various kinds is that the latter posit objective in-the-world moral facts and properties which moral language corresponds to, while contextualists interpret the relationship between moral claims and the world much more loosely (MW, 117)⁸¹. For a contextualist, the norms of correct assertibility

81 Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundation*. Oxford UP: 1999. Hereafter abbreviated as MF.

may vary greatly from context to context, in some cases requiring little of the world in order to be true.

An example of a claim that makes minimal demands on the world is the statement, “Beethoven's fifth symphony has four movements.” This statement can be true even if symphonies and movements are not identifiable in the same way that physical objects like trees and cars are; it is a correctly assertible statement “but its truth does not seem to require that there be any one THING in the WORLD⁸² that answers to “Beethoven's fifth symphony” (MF, 118). Instead there are features of the world, such as Beethoven's symphony-composing activities, along with conventions in music such as the definition of a movement, that make this phrase correctly assertible in an everyday context. Yet in a philosophical context in which we are concerned with matters of ontology and have stricter conditions for existence (such as seeking to adhere to a naturalistic ontology), the standards for correct assertion may change; we might care that symphonies can't be reduced to mind-independent natural entities, and be unwilling to posit non-natural, Platonic entities. In this case, it might be correct to assert that symphonies do not exist in the sense of existence under question, one that fits a strict naturalistic ontology (MF, 119). In other cases, the semantic norms governing the correct assertibility of statements will require very little of the world; analytic statements and statements of pure mathematics may be of this sort (MF, 117). There is therefore a broad spectrum of ways that a sentence's correct assertibility can depend upon the world.

Horgan and Timmons propose that since we sensibly predicate truth and falsity in such a wide range of types of discourse (empirical, moral, legal, mathematical, etc.), we should allow for the possibility that truth works a bit differently in these discourses, and that truth conditions will similarly vary (MF, 119-122). The alternative is to assume that truth works the same in all contexts, which then forces us to either adopt= a single semantic story on all modes of discourse that seem truth-apt, or else claim that anything

82 The use of capitalized words like WORLD and THING is used to distinguish the kind of mind-independent entities, properties, and relations that realists think our moral language corresponds to. By contrast, irrealists such as Timmons think that while we can talk about moral facts, properties, and facts, there are no moral FACTS, PROPERTIES, etc. In other words, irrealists deny that there is a mind-independent realm that our language corresponds to (MF, 116).

that doesn't fit this story is not really truth-apt after all. Horgan and Timmons propose, “why not suppose, for example, that for empirical discourse, truth involves rather robust language/WORLD relations, but that in other areas of inquiry, truth does not involve such relations?” (MF, 123). Since evaluative assertions on Horgan and Timmons view are not descriptive of a way that the world is, they make minimal demands on the world/WORLD (MF, 133). As a result, correct assertibility will also look different than it does for other domains.⁸³

When it comes to moral discourse, there are two main contexts in which to judge the correct assertibility of moral statements: a morally *engaged* and a morally *detached* perspective (MF, 150). A morally engaged perspective is one in which we make first-order moral claims, and in which semantic evaluation is “fused” with moral evaluation (CE, 275). In this context, the truth predicate is used to categorically affirm the first order moral judgement of which it is predicated.⁸⁴ For example, we affirm that apartheid is wrong, full stop; further claims such as “The claim 'Apartheid ought to be abolished' is true” affirm the same first-order claim from a metalinguistic stance (EY, 87). Thus when we speak from this morally engaged perspective, our use of “true” and “false” with regard to moral statements “becomes morally assertoric itself, so that truth ascriptions are a fusion of semantic and moral evaluation” (MF, 151). By contrast, a morally detached perspective is one in which one steps back and assesses the first-order claim. From this perspective, a moral sentence is true if and only if it is correctly assertible solely by virtue of the first-order semantic norms under which it operates, plus any relevant information from the natural world. Since according to CE there are no moral facts or properties which moral terms describe, the natural (non-moral, physical) world plays no role in making moral statements true or false. Thus when one judges from a morally detached perspective, simply according to semantic norms, “the proper thing to say about moral judgements and assertions is that they are neither true nor false” (CE, 276). When we are considering metaethical questions of truth, we are always thinking and speaking from a

83 See Thomas Scanlon's related comments about the normative domain and its relation to “the world” in *Being Realistic About Reasons* (2014).

84 Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Expressivism, Yes! Relativism, No!” 186, hereafter abbreviated as EY.

detached point of view; but since moral claims are typically made in a morally engaged context, we can still sensibly use notions of true and false in this domain.

Here the importance of resisting the semantic assumption outlined earlier becomes clear: when thinking about matters of truth, Horgan and Timmons urge the importance of keeping in mind the special kind of assertion (evaluative) that is distinctive of moral thought and discourse (MF, 147). Since moral beliefs are not descriptive, we should not assume that their semantics will include the kind of truth conditions involved in descriptive assertions. That is, “true” as applied to a moral claim does not describe the conditions the claim meets to be true. Rather, when we make moral truth ascriptions, we are making a “morally engaged semantic appraisal” in which semantic and moral evaluation are “fused”. In other words, moral truth ascriptions *are themselves evaluative claims*, a reaffirmation of one's first-order beliefs and assertions. Thus to say that the claim “apartheid is wrong” is true is itself a normative statement, a reaffirmation of one's first-order judgement that apartheid is wrong (CE, 276). In morally engaged contexts, correct assertibility is thus itself an evaluative claim, subject to the moral norms one accepts, the reasons one gives for one's claims, and so on.⁸⁵

It might seem tempting to draw the conclusion that, since moral truth ascriptions are made from within a morally engaged point of view in which one brings one's own standards to bear, moral truth is therefore relativized to personal (or social, or parochial) standards according to CE. Horgan and Timmons deny that this is the case. They take it as constitutive of moral judgements that they express commitments in a categorical way, where they understand 'categorical' to mean non-relative: when we make moral claims, we do not relativize them to our personal preferences, ideals, or standards. Another way to say this is that although moral claims are made from within a morally engaged context

85 Notice that on this way of construing truth, a regress seems to threaten: any attempt to assess the truth of a moral claim will itself be assessed as a moral claim, and so on. This makes it difficult to see what standards one should use to assess the truth of moral claims; it would seem that correct assertibility will be crucial to establishing truth in this domain, yet Horgan and Timmons give little guidance as to how correct assertibility should be understood. We will return to examine the difficulties that their view of truth faces in the second half of the chapter. Notice also the similarity to Dworkin's view that there is no “archimedian” standpoint from which to make metaethical claims; even claims about moral truth are themselves normative on Dworkin's view (“Objectivity & Truth: You'd Better Believe It,” 1996).

in which one brings one's own moral standards to bear, moral claims are not implicitly relativized to those standards. (CE, 276). The nature of moral claims is that they are simply asserted categorically and without qualification. This morally engaged, first-order categorical usage of 'true' and 'false' is semantically primary in moral thought and discourse, and since this is where truth comes in on their view, truth is not relativistic. In other words, Horgan and Timmons claim that the concept of truth used in first-order moral claims is categorical, and not at all relativized to the speaker's own views or the views of her community. There are also no “truth-makers” on their view, rather “the semantically correct thing to do is to ascribe truth to, and only to, those first-order moral statements that express one's own relevant psychological states—and to ascribe falsity to moral statements incompatible with these” (EY, 93). They content that an objectionable form of truth-relativism would be a view according to which the main usage of “true” in moral discourse is relativistic. But since on their view moral judgements are always categorical and can be defended with non-personal reasons on their view, they are not committed to this kind of relativism.⁸⁶

Finally, CE can make sense of the generic logical functional role of beliefs, such as being embedded in conditionals and used to make inferences. One of the logical features of beliefs is that their content can be embedded in a more logically complex set of beliefs such as conditionals or disjunctions, and moral beliefs are typically assumed to play this role as well. For example, one might reason that if it is wrong to steal, it's wrong to get your little brother to steal. Geach famously raised a challenge for expressivist views related to logical function: if the meaning of a moral sentence is to be understood in terms of what one does in expressing it, then its meaning must differ in cases where the claim is embedded within another one rather than being expressed.⁸⁷ For example, if the meaning of “stealing is wrong” is understood as the speaker's expression of ought-

86 Note that while Horgan and Timmons may not be committed to the specific kind of relativism they mention here, namely the kind according to which moral claims are relativized to one's own moral standards, their view may still be open to charges of relativism of other types. I explore this criticism more toward the end of the chapter.

87 This is known as the “Frege-Geach” objection, as Geach (1964) attributes the basic line of objection to Frege.

commitment not to steal, as CE implies, then what does “stealing is wrong” mean when not being expressed in a morally engaged context? Since embedded moral statements are used regularly and make sense in moral reasoning, expressivists owe us an explanation of their meaning.

As expected, given their approach to truth, Horgan and Timmons propose thinking about logical function from the point of view of morally engaged versus detached. They point out that in cases where a moral claim is embedded within a conditional, as in the stealing example above, one does not assert the antecedent but the whole conditional sentence, and normally this is done from within a morally engaged stance (MF, 162). They further claim that it is important to notice how such conditionals are typically used: sentences such as “if it's wrong to steal, it's wrong to get my little brother to steal” can be understood as expressions of a second-order stance that expresses commitment to a combination of possible first-order stances. We can appeal to the usual inference rules for moral arguments taking the form of *modus ponens*, for example, and conclude that anyone who sincerely asserts both premises “is committed to an overall moral outlook that includes the specific moral stance expressed by the argument's conclusion” (MF, 162). Thus in cases where simple moral statements are embedded, their typical expressive function is suspended because the broader logical relationship in which the moral claim is embedded is being asserted instead. In these cases, there is no equivocation on the meaning of moral terms because nowhere in the conditional are they being expressed; their only meaning is that of the larger logical inference.

Having shown how their view can accommodate the basic phenomenological and functional roles of beliefs, Horgan and Timmons conclude that their view can successfully accommodate the “objective pretensions” of moral thought and experience. These are some of the features of ordinary, common-sense moral thought and discourse that presuppose that these practices are non-arbitrary or ‘objective’. They propose that such features fall into three broad categories: those related to the form and content of moral sentences, moral phenomenology, and our critical practices. The discussion above gives some indication of how CE can accommodate matters of form and content, so for considerations of space, we'll focus on moral phenomenology and critical practices.

Horgan and Timmons acknowledge that direct moral experience has an “objective” feel to it, and that the truth of moral claims doesn't feel “up to us” or dependent on our desires or attitudes. How can CE account for this objective feel, if there are no moral facts of the kind realists posit? They argue that two features of our moral experience are enough to account for the objective feel of morality: first, we experience ourselves as judging or “coming down” on a moral matter in a non-self-privileging way, and thus in an other-centered manner rather than a subjective, self-centered manner (MP, 297).⁸⁸ In addition, we experience this nonarbitrary “coming down” as being grounded or based on reasons that we take to hold quite apart from our own desires. They conclude that our experience of ourselves as making moral judgements in this impartial, nonarbitrary, reason-based manner provides what they call “small 'o' objectivity” that accounts for the objective pretensions of our experience (MP, 297). In other words, they don't think that there are any “capital O” objective moral facts, and that instead, what accounts for the objective feel of our moral judgements is the way that we arrive at them: in an nonarbitrary, reason-based way.

Horgan and Timmons further argue that their view can accommodate the moral deliberation that we engage in and the notions of moral error and moral progress involved in such debate (MF, 75). These practices seem to support an objective morality because they are generally aimed at arriving at non-arbitrary, true or correct moral views, and resolving conflicts between views. If there are no objective moral truths, then it becomes difficult to see how one could make sense of moral progress or moral error—how could progress or error be possible or noticeable without an objective standard?

On Horgan's and Timmon's view, claims about moral progress or improvement are to be understood as moral judgments based on reasons. If a person judges that their current view of euthanasia is better or more correct than one's previous view, or better than another person's, they do so because they think there are better or more persuasive reasons to hold the view they now hold. In doing so, a person is not simply registering that her views have changed, since “mere change is not equivalent to progress” (CE,

88 “What Does Moral Phenomenology Tell us About Moral Objectivity?” hereafter abbreviated as MP.

286). Rather, one makes a moral judgment based on “what one experiences as an improved understanding of the morally relevant aspects of euthanasia” (CE, 286). Thus Horgan and Timmons seem to think that what distinguishes mere change from moral progress on their view is the fact that one can defend one's view with reasons, and that one can gain a better understanding of the morally relevant facts about a moral issue. This way of construing moral progress fits their general approach to truth: judgements about moral progress are morally engaged semantic appraisals made from within a first-order normative point of view. They are not relative to the particular view of the person making the claim, but they are relative to the overall perspective: they are neither true nor false from a detached perspective, and so depend for their truth on being asserted in a morally engaged context.

According to Horgan and Timmons, moral disagreements are therefore disagreements in moral stance, which they understand as “directly incompatible ought-commitments” (MF, 166, MWMF, 235). In making a moral assertion, one categorically asserts one stance over the conflicting moral stances of others. Horgan and Timmons think it is this categorical feature of moral discourse and practice that makes genuine moral disagreement possible. Differing moral stances entail differing attitudes and behaviours as morally permissible, since differing moral stances involve conflicting moral norms disagreement over the moral evaluation of a person or action (MF, 235). As a result, people can meaningfully disagree about things like whether euthanasia is justified. The point of disagreement will be over whether the various factual considerations give them reason to permit or prohibit euthanasia, which will be in part determined by the particular normative theory that they endorse. The possibility of progress lies in the fact that while moral claims are categorical, our stances do not have to be dogmatic; we can have an attitude of openness to the possibility that our current outlook can be improved or mistaken. Timmons draws on the image of Neurath's boat: we make piecemeal revisions over time to some of our moral beliefs, using reflective equilibrium and “guided by various coherence-relevant constraints” (MF, 168). The fact that changes are guided in this way and not arbitrary but based on reasons means improvement over one's current moral outlook is possible.

To sum up, CE offers a new way to think about moral judgements: contrary to earlier expressivists, according to CE moral judgements are genuine beliefs. However, contrary to realists, moral beliefs are not descriptive; they are a special kind of belief, a reason-based evaluative belief about what we think the factual considerations about a situation give us reason to do. Since moral beliefs are not descriptive, evaluating their truth or falsity differs from truth and falsity in other domains. According to CE, claims about whether or not our moral beliefs are true are always themselves evaluative statements made from within a particular, first-order, morally engaged perspective. This means that questions about whether a claim is really true cannot be answered from a non-normative, removed point of view; truth evaluations are always made from a morally engaged point of view. Since we can defend our beliefs with reasons and since we experience them as externally imposed, non-arbitrary demands, CE can retain a “small 'o' objectivity”.

4.3 Evaluating cognitivist expressivism: responses in metaethical literature

Three notable critiques of Cognitivist Expressivism are given by Michael Huemer (2005), Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), and James Dreier (2004). While some of their criticisms are similar, I will highlight three distinct lines of argument that they pursue: Huemer that CE offers nothing new to the suite of non-cognitivist views and thus faces all of the same challenges, Shafer-Landau that CE cannot escape the charge of relativism, and Dreier that CE collapses into realism.

Huemer's criticism of CE is that it differs only verbally from traditional non-cognitivism, with the result that it does not offer any real advance on the problems faced by non-cognitivism (41). Traditional non-cognitivism claims that moral statements express a non-cognitive state of the speaker, such as the speaker's emotions about a topic (emotivism) or a command (prescriptivism). Huemer points out that while varieties of non-cognitivism differ in their explanation of moral language, they have in common the view that “the primary function of evaluative statements is something other than asserting propositions” (18). Horgan & Timmons claim to leave behind this basic non-cognitivist

view by allowing that there are moral assertions, but that these are assertions of a special type, namely, evaluative rather than descriptive assertions.

Huemer's criticism of CE is that it simply overlays older versions of non-cognitivism with newer, cognitivist-sounding language. For example, any sentence that has the linguistic markers of assertion is an assertion on Horgan and Timmons' view. Huemer argues that this view of assertion is simply a verbal gloss on traditional non-cognitivism: Horgan and Timmons use 'assertion' to cover both what earlier non-cognitivists would have called 'assertion' as well as what they would have called 'emotive expressions' (40). This is because a moral claim such as “eating meat is wrong” that Ayer or Stevenson would have considered to be an expression of negative emotion toward eating meat (such as disapproval), Horgan and Timmons treat as an assertion because of its linguistic form (i.e. being a declarative statement). In other words, Huemer thinks that Horgan and Timmons have widened the meaning of “assertion” beyond what earlier theorists would have understood by “assertion,” to include expressions of emotion. His claim is that simply stipulating that a moral claim is an assertion because it has the linguistic form of an assertion does not solve any of the challenges associated with the non-cognitivist view of moral claims. Unless Horgan and Timmons can successfully explain how there can be assertions that are evaluative but not descriptive, their view will face the challenges that other expressivist views face.

In fact, Huemer thinks that their view does face the same challenges. For example, he claims that like earlier versions of non-cognitivism, Horgan and Timmons' view fares poorly in explaining moral error. Take the statement, “I think cloning is good, but I could be mistaken.” Huemer asks, how can I be mistaken about a moral view, if there are no moral facts independent of my attitudes, as CE implies? If moral claims express my moral stance, rather than facts about something external to my own mental states, then it is hard to see how my moral beliefs might be mistaken; perhaps I am only mistaken about what my own moral stance truly is. Timmons view is that one may be mistaken in the sense that one's moral views might change in response to new and persuasive arguments and experiences. But Huemer claims that this view of moral error merely describes how one might come to *change* one's moral beliefs, not what it might

mean for their current moral beliefs to be *mistaken* (41). In addition, CE appears to be committed to two meanings of the word “mistaken”: the non-moral use of the word, which depends on a way the mind-independent world might be, and the moral use, which depends on the state of my future moral beliefs. The double meaning of “mistaken” would entail that sentences like “I might be mistaken about the moral status of meat-eating and about when Napoleon was defeated” would be nonsensical, when in fact they are not. The meaning that CE gives to “mistaken” in the moral context thus seems wrong. Huemer concludes that CE lacks an adequate explanation of how moral claims can be wrong.⁸⁹

Russ Shafer-Landau raises a related criticism. He argues that CE is committed to relativism. This is because expressivism is faced with a dilemma: if there is no standard fixed independently of our attitudes, as expressivism holds, then it is unclear how we can tell whose evaluative attitude is justified; who would set this standard? If evaluative standards are expressions of individual attitudes, then it would seem that anyone and everyone gets to set the standard, which implies relativism (2003: 30). Shafer-Landau notes that expressivists like Horgan and Timmons seek to retain talk of moral truth by adopting a deflationary or minimalist theory of truth according to which to say that a statement is true is simply to endorse it. The problem as he sees it is that as soon as they admit talk of truth, other aspects of expressivism entail that they are committed to relativism. Take Timmons' contextual semantics, for example: according to this view, statements that are true in one context might not be true in another. The implication for Timmons' view is that we have to speak and judge from within an engaged, first-order

⁸⁹ Huemer thinks that Hare's view faces similar challenges. Hare proposes that moral statements have both a descriptive part (the non-moral facts that are the reasons for making the moral judgment) and prescriptive part (what someone ought to do), and that it is the descriptive part that enables them to be true or false (1999: 24-5). Huemer points out that two people can make the same moral judgment, such as “We ought to invade Iraq,” yet have very different reasons for making this claim (26). Yet if the meaning of moral claims is a combination of both the descriptive and prescriptive aspects, then two people who hold differing views about why they ought to invade Iraq are not actually agreeing (despite appearances) when they make the above claim. Huemer thinks that Hare's view thus offers a false conception of the meaning of moral terms, much like the problems with the meaning of “mistaken” that he thinks Horgan and Timmons face, outlined above. For this reason, he thinks that Horgan and Timmons do not successfully move beyond the challenges previous non-cognitive views faced.

context in order for moral statements to be true or false, since in morally disengaged contexts, moral claims are neither true nor false (MF, 244). Timmons explanation of why his view avoids relativism is that from within morally engaged contexts, people always assert their views in an unqualified and categorical way, not as if their views are relativized to their own (personal or cultural) standards.

Shafer-Landau agrees that as a record of moral phenomenology, this is accurate. The problem is that it does nothing to explain what makes moral judgements true, even in morally engaged contexts. In a footnote (32), Shafer-Landau does a nice job of showing how unsatisfying the deflationary view of truth is. Deflationary views of truth follow Tarski's schema T, where *P is true iff P*. Saying that it is true that eating meat is wrong if and only if eating meat is wrong doesn't tell us anything about the features that *make* eating meat wrong, that lead us to call it wrong in the first place. Shafer-Landau points out that views like Timmons's make the right hand side of the Tarski equivalence schema quite mysterious; there is absolutely no help given to fill out the right side of the biconditional. Since Timmons holds that there are no external moral facts that make a moral statement true or false, then on his view, there is no basis other than one's own outlook for evaluating competing moral claims made by others with different outlooks. Even though few people would say that their views are true relative only to their own outlooks, Shafer-Landau thinks that unless there are moral facts that hold outside of any particular outlook, "the judgements rendered within one outlook are no more true than those of a competing outlook," and this is relativism (2003:32). He concludes that views such as Timmons' do not advance the cause of expressivism much: their view of truth creates the appearance of being able to accommodate much of the objective pretensions of moral discourse, yet does so at the cost of the very objectivity it hopes to account for (33).

In "Metaethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism," James Dreier raises a further problem for views adopting a deflationary or minimalist view of truth. Dreier argues that the trend toward minimalism in metaethics "threatens to make irrealism indistinguishable from realism" (26). The trend he refers to is the attempt by expressivists to recapture realist ways of talking about morality without committing to the

metaphysics traditionally associated with such talk. For example, expressivists argue that claims like “it’s a fact that slavery is wrong” or “it’s true that slavery is wrong” are just different ways of saying “slavery is wrong,” so that there is nothing deeper to moral truth than the first-order claim. Dreier notes that Horgan and Timmons’ challenge to the semantic assumption follows this minimalist trend: why assume that the idea of assertion is tied to description, or that beliefs are tied to representation? In challenging these definitions, Horgan and Timmons follow the minimalist trend of assuming that grammatical features such as how we use moral terms are what determine their meaning, not some deeper property associated with these features.

The problem as Dreier sees it is that there seem to be cases where moral sentences do describe or represent things being a certain way, as when we might describe someone's character as being bad or good. In these cases, what exactly are we doing, if not describing? Dreier notes that one way Timmons seeks to distinguish between an expressivist and realist view of things like moral facts and properties is to say that realists are committed to metaphysically inflated, mind-independent versions of facts and properties. Following a convention introduced by Crispin Wright, Timmons uses block letters to distinguish these: expressivists can sensibly talk of moral facts and properties and maybe even descriptions, but they don't mean the metaphysically loaded FACTS and PROPERTIES and DESCRIPTIONS that realists refer to. To put it another way, expressivism claims that a belief is just a state expressed by an assertion, whereas an ASSERTION is something grander and BELIEFS have to be representational (Dreier, 29). Cognitivist expressivism follows the same trend as earlier expressivists in using common moral terms in a metaphysically deflated sense.

However, Dreier thinks this strategy is not all that successful in explaining how irrealism differs from realism. He notes that Timmons’ claims that the block-letter versions of moral terms are supposed to refer to “mind-independent” properties, facts, and so on (MF 116). But an example demonstrates the difficulty involved in clarifying what this means: someone committed to CE will agree that slavery is morally wrong, and even that it has the property (lowercase) of wrongness. Following Timmons' way of distinguishing expressivist from realist understandings of “property,” does this mean that

for an expressivist, the wrongness of slavery is *mind-dependent*? Dreier points out that surely Timmons would not want to claim that slavery wouldn't be wrong "if only slavery-haters mellowed out a little" (29). So it appears that the wrongness of slavery is mind-independent in some sense, and Timmons will need some way of explaining how it is mind-independent without being MIND-INDEPENDENT in realist way his view rejects. Dreier concludes that this example illustrates that those who feel confident that there is a difference between irrealism and realism should find themselves concerned that it is so difficult to explain just what that difference amounts to (31).

4.4 A commendation and a criticism

A common theme in all three criticisms outlined above is the idea that CE does not add anything much to advance the cause of expressivism in particular, or to add the metaethical debate about moral truth and objectivity in general. Huemer thinks CE differs only verbally from earlier non-cognitivism and thus faces the same challenges, Shafer-Landau thinks CE's view of truth is no better than expressivist views before it, and Dreier questions whether CE "really occupies any new place, or if instead it might just be a new notation" (28). While there are merits to all three of their specific criticisms that I will outline shortly, I propose that all three also miss the distinct contribution that CE makes to the metaethical literature.

The contribution I have in mind is Horgan and Timmons' challenge to the Semantic Assumption (SA, that all cognitive content is descriptive) and their corresponding contention that moral beliefs are not descriptive but evaluative. This seems to me an important feature of their view that distinguishes them from expressivists before them and potentially offers a new way to think about moral claims. If successful, it moves their view into the cognitivist camp, which is a significant shift from a group of views generally considered non-cognitivist by nature. Of course this difference will have to amount to more than a verbal one, or the above criticisms may hold. I think there is at least the possibility that the difference is substantial and important.

First, Horgan and Timmons contention that evaluative statements should be examined and treated as *sui generis* seems right. The activity of evaluating does seem

fundamentally different from describing; this is what is distinct and unique about moral claims, and why they arguably cannot and should not be reduced to something else. Moral claims don't describe an action or person, but evaluate: they tell us whether to emulate them or not, whether to pursue this action, or avoid that one. For example, even when we make a claim like "Smith is arrogant," we are not only describing some action, we are evaluating that action as morally wrong; the descriptive part (actions that falsely elevate one's own abilities) is so intertwined with the evaluative part (these actions are wrong) that it's easy to overlook the distinct aspects of moral and descriptive claims. Moral claims are aimed at guiding our actions, and they also tell us what to think and how to feel about a particular subject. They capture our reasoning about what the various facts about a situation (and here I use "facts" to refer to non-moral kinds) give us reason to do. These aspects of moral claims go far beyond description, that much seems clear; some description might be present ("that person makes statements that are untrue") but adds the further evaluative component ("lying is a bad thing to do"). If moral beliefs are distinct and irreducible to non-moral ones in this way, then Horgan and Timmons' challenge of the semantic assumption also seems on the right track: why should all cognitive content be descriptive? Why assume that in order to be about something, beliefs must be descriptive? It seems that moral beliefs could be about what we think factual considerations give us reason to do. If our definitions of cognitive content fit description or representation, but our moral thought and discourse doesn't seem descriptive, then it seems reasonable to reexamine our definition of cognitive content.⁹⁰

In fact, it seems more reasonable than assuming that all moral claims must reduce to expressions of non-cognitive mental states because our linguistic taxonomy doesn't allow for non-descriptive cognitive content. Such a conclusion contradicts everyday moral discourse and practice, and fails to account for the seriousness with which we argue about and deliberate over moral claims. It's not clear why the options should be

90 Of course, another option is to reject cognitivism and conclude that moral claims cannot have cognitive content, at least not the type other kinds of beliefs have. However, I tend to side with Horgan and Timmons on their contention that giving up cognitivism seems hasty and unnecessary when moral beliefs share so many features that are typical of other beliefs. It seems more reasonable to think of them as beliefs of a different kind, than to think that although they share so many features with other kinds of beliefs, they are fundamentally different in that they cannot have content.

limited to either understanding cognitive content as descriptive, or seeing moral claims as non-cognitive; the other logical option is to take our moral phenomenology seriously and look for another way to understand cognitive content that suits an evaluative context. While our common moral practices may turn out to be wrong, it seems overly hasty to jump to that conclusion simply because our current conceptual apparatus can't account for non-descriptive content. If Horgan and Timmons can show how their view avoids some of the challenges of earlier expressivists, for example, by showing how the meaning of assertion might be different in this context, then the difference will be more than a verbal one as Huemer claims.

One way that Horgan and Timmons' view opens up the debate in a new way is that if moral claims are genuine beliefs, not about a way that the world is (i.e. that there is a property of goodness that attaches to a particular action or attitude) but about what a person has reason to do, then moral stances are not reducible to non-cognitive attitudes such as disapproval. To explain the difference another way, a realist might say that when you judge that the fact that something is pleasurable gives you a reason to pursue it, you are responding to the property of being a reason that supervenes on the pleasurable state of affairs. The realist may also say that the property of goodness attaches to pleasure. On a non-descriptive view of belief, my conclusion that some facts give me a reason to do something is not my recognition of the property of being a reason, or the property of being good; rather, my conclusion that something is a reason is my own evaluation, the conclusion to my own process of reasoning. It is a judgement about what the non-moral facts in a situation give me reason to do. In a sense, the normativity lies with the one doing the evaluating, not the object; or at least, not only in the object. It's difficult to say how and where normativity comes into the picture here; my point is that the rational process involved in moral claims on Horgan and Timmons view (assessing what reasons we think the nonmoral facts give us to do) seems to lend support to the idea that moral claims are cognitive (i.e. part of a rational process, with cognitive content), and this seems like a genuine step forward from earlier expressivist views.

To elaborate, the part of Horgan and Timmons' view that opens up this possibility is their claim that moral beliefs are like other beliefs in that they “possess a kind of

rational authority, consisting in their being grounded in *reasons*” (CE, 264, emphasis theirs). They understand the source of these reasons to be the nonmoral factual considerations that ground our judgements, which we judge to be morally relevant, not moral facts (at least of the kind realists subscribe to) that we recognize and respond to. Moral stances on Horgan and Timmons’ view are thus beliefs about what the nonmoral factual considerations relevant to a situation give us reason to do. While this may sound similar to someone like Parfit’s view, who also claims that facts give us reasons, the difference is that for Horgan and Timmons, there is not a non-natural property of being a reason that our beliefs describe. Rather, moral beliefs are evaluations, judgements made about what we think the facts about a situation give us reason to do. Again, the normativity is not “out there” somewhere to be perceived or intuited, but somehow in us, at least in the sense that we are the ones drawing normative conclusions about what the non-normative facts give us reason to do.

The connection Horgan and Timmons make between reasons and objectivity also fits the way that concerns about moral objectivity show up in everyday moral thought and discourse. Recall their claim that the impartial stance we take while making moral judgements, along with the fact that we experience ourselves judging in an impartial, nonarbitrary, reason-based manner is what accounts for the objective feel of our moral judgements, the “small 'o' objectivity” that they ascribe to (MP, 297). In addition, moral claims are objective on their view because and when they bind independently of desire. While their focus is mostly on explaining how we experience morality as objective, I think another feature of moral experience supports their claim that reasons are central to objectivity: the way that questions about moral objectivity arise in everyday life. Consider a situation where I am trying to convince a friend of the correctness of a moral claim, perhaps that eating meat is wrong. I might list some reasons why I think it’s wrong to eat meat, such as the suffering involved for animals in most farming situations, and the fact that humans don’t need meat to survive and thrive. My friend might consider these reasons, but still doubt that I’m right; she might ask, “But is eating meat *really* wrong?” Putting aside questions about how to best interpret the word “really” in this sentence, think about how we typically respond to the question: by giving more reasons. I might reply that, yes, eating meat *really is* wrong, for the further reasons that it wreaks terrific

damage on the environment and wastes a dwindling supply of fresh drinking water. If my friend seems reluctant to agree, I might go over my reasons again and try to defend them in more detail, such as giving more details about the high level of suffering involved in factory farming or the inconsistency involved in caring about the wellbeing of our pets but not about farm animals. I might conclude that together, these reasons make it the case that eating meat really is wrong.⁹¹

It seems that questions about whether something is really wrong are questions about moral objectivity; in other words, about whether a claim is true or simply the expression of personal preferences. What's interesting to note is that the practice of reason-giving not only helps to explain why moral judgements are *experienced* as objective, as Horgan and Timmons claim, it also seems to be part of what *makes them objective*, the evidence we give to defend the truth of our claims. In other words, our ability to give impartial, nonarbitrary considerations in favor of our moral claims is a central part of what establishes their objectivity; without being able to do this, we have little recourse to defend the truth or rightness of our moral claims. The centrality of reason-giving to everyday discussions of moral truth seems to confirm this. If my friend presses me to defend or explain why I think eating meat is truly, objectively wrong, I don't resort to "well, I just don't *like* to hurt animals" as a way to convince her; or if I do, we both know my argument has run its course and I have nothing further to convince her with. This central role that reasons play in defending the truth of everyday moral claims suggests that Horgan and Timmons are looking in the right place in building a defense of objectivity in ethics: if reasons are what we rely on most to defend the truth of our moral claims, then an account of how reasons can play this role is a good and important place to start.

91 In order to fill out the connection between reason-giving and the objectivity of moral claims in more detail, I would need to offer some account of reasons: how these should be understood, whether they are basic. For example, I might adopt Scanlon's view of "reasons fundamentalism" (2014) according to which reasons are "not reducible to or identifiable with nonnormative truths" or explained in terms of "notions of rationality...that are not themselves claims about reasons" (2). For now, my focus is limited to elucidating the connection between the activity of reason-giving and truth when it comes to moral claims, and trying to clarify what role reasons play in truth claims.

If this is right, then they may be able to provide a more nuanced response to the three criticisms above than is recognized by the authors. Start with Huemer's criticism, that Horgan and Timmons' view cannot properly explain moral progress, since it would appear that their view really only describes changes in one's view, not improvement. In response to this criticism, Horgan and Timmons deny that mere change is equivalent to progress, and claim that the fact that one is making a judgment backed by reasons is what makes moral progress possible (CE, 286). A person might have “an improved understanding of the morally relevant aspects” of a moral issue and thus make an improved moral judgement (CE, 286). Perhaps the reason there can be an improvement on their views is that nonmoral facts introduce an external element into moral judgement, some degree of objectivity, in the sense that moral judgements are responses to facts (what reasons we think they give us) external to our own pre-existing desires or beliefs and not simply expressions of feelings or desires. The role of nonmoral facts also clarifies why moral judgements might be understood as genuine beliefs on CE: moral judgements are beliefs about what the nonmoral facts give us reasons to do in a particular situation. Yet they are not descriptive beliefs because they do not describe any special property of reasons-relations or goodness that supervenes on these facts; instead, they are a special kind of belief, evaluative belief, which evaluates what the (non-moral) facts about a situation seem to give us reason to do. And moral beliefs do not describe reasons, since this would be another form of realism: that reasons are there like moral facts to be described. Rather, beliefs can be about something yet not descriptive; evaluative beliefs are claims about what the nonmoral facts give us reasons to do. And this claim about reasons is a normative judgement, an evaluative claim, not a description.

While this sounds a lot like realism (Parfit, for example, uses very similar language about facts giving us reasons), again, the difference is that according to CE there is no normative property that attaches to nonmoral facts that we are describing or representing in our moral judgements, not even the property of being a reason. Horgan and Timmons argue that when we make a claim about what the nonmoral facts give us reason to do, we are making a moral claim; moral reasons are thus to be understood in the same way claims about truth are on their view, as themselves substantive claims (CE, 286). They write that “the enquiry into those nonmoral factual considerations that serve

as good reasons for accepting or denying moral statements is what moral thinking is all about” (CE, 286). Thus the normative aspect of moral claims shifts from an external *moral* fact to an external *nonmoral* fact on CE; the normativity is found within the act of judging that the nonmoral facts give me reasons to act in a particular way. This is interesting because it is a sort of hybrid view: there is no external moral reality to which we are responding, but neither are our moral claims reduced to whatever desires or nonrational feelings we happen to have. They are something in between, shaped by facts and reasons. While this view would need development to be a viable alternative to the metaethical theories currently on offer, CE seems to suggest at least a beginning in a new direction. For this reason, I think Huemer overstates the case when he claims that CE brings nothing new to the metaethical table.

Filling out how this view that moral claims might be partially externally justified avoids relativism as Shafer-Landau claims is a more difficult matter. I think much of his claim still holds, which I will elaborate on in the next section. However, one aspect of his criticism that might be informed by my argument above is that perhaps the right side of the Tarski schema can be filled out a bit more than Shafer-Landau claims. If moral judgements are justified on the basis of the nonmoral facts about a case which I take to give me reasons, then perhaps one way to fill out the schema is this: the claim that eating meat is wrong is true if and only if the facts about eating meat give me reason not to do it. While this will be unsatisfying in the sense that it simply pushes the burden back onto how facts give us reasons, it at least fills out the picture a bit more than simply repeating the claim that eating meat is wrong. A virtue of this way of filling out the schema is that it fits with moral practice: when we are asked why something is wrong, we typically give reasons for our view. If we are pressed to explain why something is *really* wrong, we interpret this as an invitation to dig deeper and find further, compelling reasons to believe as we do. We don't simply repeat the initial moral claim as a way to explain why we think it is true. Again, Horgan and Timmons' CE seems to open up a new way of explaining truth that doesn't require description of mysterious moral facts and properties, nor a reduction of claims to expressions of non-cognitive mental states.

For the same reasons, the above discussion suggests that Dreier also misses what is distinctive about CE. Returning to the slavery example, perhaps an avenue open to Horgan and Timmons is to say that the wrongness of slavery does not depend on what anyone happens to think about it, but on the nonmoral, descriptive facts about slavery: that it deprives people of their basic liberty, causes much suffering, etc.⁹² This is not necessarily to admit that slavery's wrongness is mind-independent in the sense that it is a non-natural normative property that attaches to slavery that we somehow recognize, the capitalized version of mind independence that Timmons seeks to distinguish his view from. But it does mean that there may be a way to talk about the wrongness of slavery that does not reduce to any person's feelings about slavery, nor depend on our being able to detect a non-natural normative property of wrongness. If so, then on the face of it, CE offers an interesting new option that deserves exploration.

Nonetheless, despite the promising new territory CE may open up, some significant challenges remain. First, if reasons play a key role in making moral claims objective, then the problem of how their view can explain moral truth gets pushed back onto how their view can explain moral reasons. In other words, instead of wondering whether there are moral facts or properties that our moral judgements pick out, on Horgan and Timmons we are left with the challenge of wondering whether there are special reason-facts that our reasons pick out. As noted above, Horgan and Timmons acknowledge this problem, and propose that their view of reasons should also be understood in an expressivist way: claims about reasons are also normative claims, made from within a normative framework, informed by a particular normative theory. They think that reasons do not require reason-facts any more than moral claims require moral facts; the claim that something is a reason would be assessed according to the norms and

92 Again, one might wonder how we get from nonmoral facts to basic normative claims: what helps us to make that connection? Horgan and Timmons propose that various normative theories help to fill out which facts give us which reasons (CE, 286), and that we might turn to these for guidance. From a metaethical point of view, reasons will be assessed using the contextualist approach to truth that they advocate, but on a normative, first-order level, questions about reasons in ethics will depend on the particular normative theory one adopts. This first-order normative theory guides us in knowing which nonmoral facts are morally relevant or morally important.

standards of reasoning applicable to the normative theory one has chosen, and according to the contextualist semantics they propose.

One problem with this view of reasons is that it has challenging implications for the connection to objectivity. If moral claims are expressions of my commitment to a particular way of acting or being in the world, and I defend their truth by giving reasons, but these reasons are also defined as my own evaluative judgement, then it appears that we have simply pushed the debate back another level. In this case, reasons cannot help to make moral claims impartial and objective, since they don't describe something in the world, but my own judgment about things. In the argument I gave above for the possibility that I think CE opens up, I presented reasons as connected to nonmoral, descriptive facts. This is the only place I can see objectivity or external standards coming in: facts which do not depend on any person's view, giving us reasons to act in a particular way. However, if our judgements about which facts give us reasons are themselves normative claims, then it becomes difficult to see how there can be any kind of objectivity: all of our moral claims are made from within a morally engaged normative framework, with no standard to say when we are correct or not apart from that framework. Therefore the possibility that I see in CE would need to be filled out with an adequate view of reasons in order for it to be realized.

One of the consequences of not having a way to judge what reasons are better than others (since such claims are normative claims made from a first-order point of view, and there is no explanation of how we might stand outside of this point of view to judge their accuracy) is that Horgan and Timmons cannot so easily escape the criticisms raised by Huemer and Shafer-Landau. If claims about reasons are always normative claims made from within an engaged framework, with no external standard to assess them, then it is difficult to see how we would judge that we have made moral progress, or that another's view is mistaken. It would seem that one could come to very different moral conclusions than another person, yet make claims that one takes to be based on nonmoral facts that give us reasons, and that are correctly assertible in our normative context. In fact this happens all the time in cross-cultural disagreements, and even among those from the same culture who have very different moral views. Without some sense of

standard external to our own normative framework, it's unclear how moral claims are not relative to a particular context on Horgan and Timmons view, even if we don't experience them that way. It is also difficult to see how, if they are not relative, we might find out who is right and who is wrong. To what would we appeal? A more developed account of the relationship between reasons and moral truth is needed to address these issues.

A second issue with their view of objectivity is that in a number of places, Horgan and Timmons seem to conflate phenomenology with normativity. To begin, they take certain shared phenomenological features such as psychologically “coming down” on an issue in a reason-based way to be evidence that moral judgements count as beliefs. They further propose that certain phenomenological features of moral beliefs such as the “felt demand” that agents experience on their behaviour count as evidence that there is something importantly distinct about moral beliefs, namely that they are capable of motivating us to act regardless of our desires. They also propose that our experience of ourselves as making moral judgements in an impartial, reason-based manner is sufficient to explain why moral experience has an “objective” feel to it: we don't need to assume moral facts of the realist variety to explain the objective feel of moral experience, rather the distinct role that reasons play in moral phenomenology can successfully account for this objective feel (MP, 297). Together, these observations about moral phenomenology support their claims that moral judgements have features that qualify them as genuine beliefs, and that CE can accommodate the objective feel of moral experience without recourse to moral facts of the realist variety.

The problem is that Horgan and Timmons then move from this description of the phenomenology of moral belief to the claim that this phenomenology is somehow *constitutive* of moral objectivity. In a proposal for an upcoming book, they write that “the distinctive roles of reasons, in moral experience and moral belief-formation, constitute a very important form of objectivity in matters moral.”⁹³ At first glance, their emphasis on the roles of reasons suggests that they might have more to say to fill out the connection

⁹³ “Illuminating Reasons: An Essay in Moral Phenomenology,” book proposal accessible online: http://timmons.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/timmons.faculty.arizona.edu/files/Book_Proposal.pdf

between reasons and objectivity in further work, perhaps along the lines I've proposed above. Again, it seems that on their view, reasons are central to objectivity. However, directly following the above sentence, they explain that it is because reasons are *experienced* as being grounded externally and intrinsically motivating that they constitute “a fundamental form of objectivity in morals” (9). In another place the emphasis on our experience of moral reasons is even more clear when they claim that “the distinctive *experiential character* of moral reasons—as externally grounded, as independent of one’s pre-existing desires, and as intrinsically motivational—constitutes a key and fundamental form of objectivity in morals” (6, emphasis mine). But is it the fact that we *experience* reasons as externally grounded and impartial that makes them objective? This would imply that a belief is objective as long as it feels objective, for example as long as it binds irrespective of our desires. But surely there are beliefs that bind in this way and yet might turn out to be mistaken. For example, a person could hold the belief that homosexuality is wrong, and this belief may bind irrespective of the empathy and understanding they happen to have for a friend who is gay. Is their belief then objectively true simply because it feels externally compelling in this way? In other words, it is unclear whether our experience of moral reasons as objective is to be understood on Horgan and Timmons view as evidence that these reasons are correct (where “correct” may be defined by the standards in a particular normative context, and not our experience), or as what makes them correct. I suggest below that they are unclear on this matter. For now, the point is that while features of moral beliefs such as that they bind irrespective of our desires might be able to account for why we *experience* moral claims as objective, these features don’t yet explain whether or not they actually are, since as the above example shows, surely our experience of a belief having certain experiential features is not enough to make it true.

In a recently published paper on moral error, Horgan and Timmons continue to grant moral experience a puzzling priority.⁹⁴ They propose that an improvement in one’s moral views (correction of a moral error) can be understood as a cognitive transition

⁹⁴ “Modest Quasi-Realism and the Problem of Deep Moral Error,” 2016, 190-209.

which is the outcome of an idealization process. They build a number of features into this process which they propose will help to mitigate worries about how their view can account for error. They suggest that one's moral views might change for the better when all of the non-moral beliefs involved in this change are factually accurate, and when the process of change is an exercise of one's cognitive competence and performance in moral matters. For example, one kind of competence might be the ability to discern one's own flaws in reasoning such as hasty generalization, and to be aware of what is entailed by the moral standards a person possesses at the time of idealization. While this process of idealization that involves checking for certain kinds of errors might help to improve one's reasoning process, experience still plays a key role. This is because the final desiderata of the idealization process they outline is that one *experiences* the change of one's view as an improvement or change for the better (197). They take the example of Oskar Schindler's dramatic change in moral sensibility toward Jews during the Holocaust to be an example of the kind of radical improvement one can make, and which they think their view can account for. A crucial part of the story on their view is that Schindler experienced this change as an improvement (201). What is noticeably missing is any account of what makes Schindler's change an improvement rather than mere change, other than Schindler's own point of view and process of idealization. If Horgan and Timmons' proposed phenomenological approach to objectivity, which relies heavily on the authoritative nature of moral experience, is to be successful, it will need to fill out some way of accounting for error: a way in which we might tell when, even if a belief seems compelling, it still may be wrong. The idea that morality is objective because we experience it so is not (yet) a defensible account of objectivity.

A consequence of this part of their view is that tying moral objectivity and error so closely to our experience of morality as objective opens their view up to relativism, as Shafer-Landau has argued. If all that makes my moral claims true and prevents them from being expressions of my own limited views is that I experience them as objective, then morality appears to be a kind of personal fiction that we are all engaging in. Horgan and Timmons open themselves up to this possibility by answering the charge of relativism with the claim that since we don't explain or understand our moral claims as relative to our own views, then they're not relative. Yet if our experience is enough to

establish truth in ethics, then if a person experienced morality as relative and arbitrary, their view would be correct as well. In addition, as we noted above, there is very little explanation given in a minimalist view of truth to fill out the right side of the biconditional, about what it means to say “the claim that slavery is wrong is true if and only if slavery is wrong”. According to the view of objectivity presented by Horgan and Timmons, it seems that another legitimate way to fill out the above sentence is to say that “it is true that slavery is wrong if and only if I experience the wrongness of slavery as objective, grounded in external, intrinsically motivating reasons.” Since this would make the wrongness of slavery dependent on my experience of it being wrong, and thus relative to my own experience and views, truth appears relative on their view.

Tying moral objectivity to our experience of reasons as external also doesn't adequately address the problems Huemer raises around explaining moral error or progress. Again, it would make it seem that as long as it seems to each of us that we are progressing or changing our moral views in the right direction, then we are. As long as Schindler experienced his change as an improvement, it was. However, if moral objectivity is explained primarily by our experience of reasons as external and nonarbitrary, it's difficult to see how anyone could say that we're in error or that our changes in moral views count as progress. It seems that we could always justify our views, as long as they *felt* externally imposed and binding, or so long as they were the outcome of the idealized process Horgan and Timmons refer to in more recent work. Tying moral objectivity too closely to moral phenomenology thus seems to take the authority out of moral claims altogether, so that moral error would be reduced to a failure to act in line with my own experience of what I have moral reasons to do. Again, if there is not some standard apart from a person's own experience, then Horgan and Timmons cannot successfully defend the idea that moral truth is invariant with respect to our subjective desires.

4.5 Conclusion

In the end, Horgan and Timmons offer a linguistic and phenomenological solution to a normative and practical problem. They propose that questions about practical questions such as how to tell whether a moral claim is true or not should be interpreted as

first-order claims, and lead to further moral deliberation about the issue. They also propose that moral claims can be objective because they bind independently of our desires, and because their grounding in nonmoral facts provides an external source of authority. While they capture the reason-giving part of moral deliberation and make an intriguing connection between reasons and objectivity, more needs to be said about how nonmoral facts give us reasons. What is missing from the picture is an adequate explanation of the nature of reasons on their view: if reasons are key to grounding moral claims, what is the nature and status of reasons? Explaining claims about reasons as normative claims made from within a morally engaged framework only shifts the debate from truth to reasons; more must be said to fill out what reasons are and how nonmoral facts give us reasons on their view. Thus while CE offers an intriguing new way to think about objectivity in connection with reasons, much more needs to be said to clarify and extend the view. For now, small 'o' objectivity is not yet a defensible account of moral objectivity.

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5 Conclusion: what's worth keeping?

In the previous chapters, I have outlined three contemporary metaethical views and the way each seeks to account for moral objectivity, and argued that each view faces serious difficulties. In this final chapter, I return to consider the question I posed at the outset of my dissertation: of these varieties of objectivity, what's worth keeping? In light of the difficulties I raised for each view, the short answer is that none of these varieties of objectivity is worth keeping in its entirety. However, each view offers something important and worth keeping when it comes to thinking about moral objectivity. In what follows, I briefly summarize each author's view and the challenges each faces. I then make some observations about each view and the way in which the views relate to each other, and suggest three lessons that may prove helpful to the debate over moral objectivity.

All three views share a common aim: to defend the idea that the truth of moral claims are at least in some sense invariant with respect to our subjective attitudes about morality. In other words, they share the conviction that what's right and wrong doesn't vary with people's opinions and attitudes about right and wrong; moral truth is not dependent on whatever we happen to think is right in a given moment. However, the authors disagree significantly when it comes to how to understand moral objectivity.

We'll begin where we started, with Parfit's view. On his view, moral claims can be objective when they accurately represent the moral facts, and we can know that they are true by reference to rational intuition of self-evident truths. Parfit thus thinks that the truth of moral claims is invariant with respect to our subjective attitudes because of the non-natural moral objects that our moral claims describe: normative facts about what we have reason to do. These non-natural moral facts and properties do not depend for their existence on what anyone happens to think of them; they are mind-independent, in the sense that we discover rather than create them. His view thus appeals to an ontological conception of objectivity by understanding moral truth in terms of correctly describing moral objects (non-natural moral facts). Recall that on this conception, just as there are physical objects that our language describes, so there are moral "objects" (normative

facts, properties) that our moral language describes; and just as the former kind of object do not rely for their existence on the psychological states of those observing them, neither do the latter. Stars exist regardless of whether or not anyone happens to see them, and child abuse is wrong even if no one happens to think so.

However, it turns out to be quite difficult to explain what these normative facts or properties might be, and how we might identify them. Since Parfit defines reason-giving nonmoral facts and valuable outcomes in terms of each other, his view leads to an explanatory circle: we are supposed to identify which natural facts are reason-giving by considering whether they make an outcome valuable, but we cannot know whether an outcome is valuable unless we know that the natural facts give us reasons to prefer it. And since non-natural normative facts do the normative work on Parfit's view, being able to identify normative facts is central to knowing what we have reason to do. Yet Parfit's epistemology is not up to the task: he is unclear about the nature of self-evident truth, and implies that there are some fundamental moral truths for which we simply cannot give helpful arguments. Together with the worrisome fact that rational intuition can be susceptible to all kinds of bias, the idea that some of our moral beliefs do not require argument to be justified presents a less than compelling moral epistemology. Thus while there may be objective, self-evident truths such as Parfit proposes, his view does not offer a compelling account of the nature of these truths and how to find them.

Street's approach to moral truth is almost the exact opposite of Parfit's. Where he seeks to secure objectivity in non-natural normative truths that exist quite apart from whatever any individual happens to value or desire, Street begins with contingent values and desires. Since she can see no good way to explain how selective pressures might have led us to track normative truth, Street proposes that normative truth is simply a function of the evaluative judgements that these pressures have led us to believe. Where Parfit holds that values and moral truths are somehow there for us to discover, Street thinks that we create value in the act of valuing; things are valuable because we take them to be. How we discover normative truth is thus no longer a mystery, since we merely explore what follows from the standpoint of the normative convictions we already hold. We can preserve the objectivity of moral claims on Street's view because it is still possible to

make errors when we act in ways that are inconsistent with our own values. However, since the standards of correctness are ultimately set by the normative judgements of the person whose reasons are in question, we are left with a less robust level of objectivity than the realist claims. Since this is all Street thinks is available to us, given what Darwinian considerations about normative truth imply, we're led to rethink normative truth and objectivity in the ways she suggests.

The problem with this view of moral truth is that it is far too insular and narrow a source of reasons; our values are not the only source of reasons. Facts about other people play an especially important role in giving us reasons to act, so that an account that leaves these out has missed something central to morality. Street's view also leads to some unappealing consequences for moral discourse and practice. On her view, it could be true that although a person was causing a child great harm by abusing her, if he had no values which prohibited this abuse, then he would have no reason not to abuse her. In addition, since she thinks that one has no reasons or values until one takes oneself to have them, her view makes it seem as though valuing as an activity just sort of appeared on the scene for humanity, not for any particular reason, such as in response to facts about their interactions with others and what made those go well. Yet to understand valuing as itself an arational and arbitrary process seems not to fit with primacy of reasons in both her view and in everyday moral life. Finally, Street's view has the unfortunate result of making moral disagreement intractable because unless we have shared values, there is little we can say to those we disagree with. Street thus offers a view of moral truth and reasoning that fails to align with central features of morality.

Horgan and Timmons propose a third approach to moral truth and objectivity which rejects moral facts altogether, both as realists like Parfit and constructivists like Street construe them. They argue that we don't need moral facts of either variety to account for the 'objective pretensions' of morality, and propose that their Cognitive Expressivism (CE) can successfully accommodate moral phenomena without reference to putative moral facts. They begin by challenging the assumption that all cognitive content is descriptive content, and propose that instead, moral beliefs are a distinct kind whose content seeks not to describe some moral reality (non-natural or otherwise) but to

evaluate and provide reasoned action-guidance. They propose that since evaluative beliefs are unique, notions of truth, falsity, and assertibility in this domain will also be unique, and suggest that claims about moral truth are best understood as categorical reaffirmations of first-order moral judgements, themselves normative claims that are subject to the moral norms one accepts and the reasons one can give for one's claim. They take the distinctive experiential character of moral reasons as externally grounded and intrinsically motivational to constitute a key and fundamental form of objectivity in morals. They call this “small 'o' objectivity” because it does not make any claims about an objective moral reality, yet retains the idea that the truth of moral claims is not simply reducible to personal preferences. I have argued that their view nicely captures the role reasons play in moral deliberation: when we defend the truth of our moral claims, why we think they're “really” or truly right, we appeal to reasons. This makes their proposed connection between reasons and moral objectivity promising.

However, Horgan and Timmons' view of truth makes it unclear how moral progress is possible: if claims about moral truth are always themselves normative claims made on the basis of nonmoral facts and the reasons we think these give us to act, this pushes the justificatory burden back onto reasons and we thus need a way of judging what count as good or authoritative reasons. In addition, they move too quickly from moral phenomenology to normativity, so that their view seems to imply that something is objective or an error if we experience it as such. As a result of these problems, their view appears susceptible to relativism: if the moral norms of a particular context determine what count as good or authoritative reasons, this makes it seem as though truth is relative to the particular context in which we make the claim. In addition, if personal experience plays a central role in determining whether a change in moral opinion is an improvement, then it is difficult to see how truth is not relative to a person's own perspective. Since the ability to avoid relativism is a central issue at stake in questions about objectivity in everyday moral discourse and practice, and Horgan and Timmons offer little to explain what would make any reasons better than others, in the end CE does not offer an adequate account of moral objectivity.

So what can we learn about moral objectivity from all of this? I note three observations about these views, and suggest three lessons or conclusions that follow.

The first observation is one about argumentative strategy: in each view, the place where the authors employ quietism, or downplay a part of their view that seems a bit mysterious, also happens to point to some of the biggest weaknesses of their view. In Parfit's case, the relationship between natural facts and reasons, the nature of self-evident truths, and the reliability of rational intuition remain unclear and as I have argued, pose the largest problems for his view. As Philip Kitcher puts it, according to Parfit we possess an ability “that can be exercised, in ways we do not understand at all, to yield a special sort of truth that we also do not understand at all.”⁹⁵ In each of these areas where Parfit insists that there is nothing mysterious to figure out, closer examination reveals that important questions remain unanswered.

Street's view involves the least mystery, but some nonetheless, around the way that value enters the picture on her view. We are told that value entered the world with valuing creatures, and that the initial choice of what to value was (and is) not one made for any reason. Yet this leaves out the kind of weighing of nonmoral facts about a situation and what they might give us or anyone reason to do, regardless of our particular values. Thus the mystery in Street's view is around why nonmoral facts should not be understood to give us normative reasons apart from our personal values; it makes our response to our surroundings seem arbitrary. Thus the nature of value and its connection to reasons seems to be seriously demoted on Street's view.

Finally, Horgan and Timmons downplay the difficulty in a number of key areas: in the way that factual considerations exert a felt demand on us, how to interpret moral truth claims, and how moral error enters the picture on their view. In the first case, Horgan and Timmons argue that part of what makes moral beliefs unique is that they involve an experience of a “felt demand” that issues from the circumstances that we face. They think that natural, non-moral facts are the source of this felt demand, but say very

95 “The Lure of the Peak,” *New Republic* (Online book review), Jan.11, 2012.

<http://www.tnr.com/article/books/magazine/99529/on-what-matters-derek-parfit>

little about how this relationship works; like Parfit, they leave the reader to guess about which natural facts are reason-giving and how we would know which ones give us reasons. They propose that moral truth be understood minimally, so that we are asked to view questions about moral truth as we would any other first-order moral question. The trouble with this view of truth is revealed when we consider a third part of their view, the way in which they account for moral error. They propose that when we say that we have made a moral error, we are making a judgment based on what we experience as an improved understanding. While this may partially explain why we have changed our view, it hardly explains what would justify this change, or how we know that we are making any progress. If all questions about moral truth are to be answered on a first-order normative level, it appears that many of them will simply be left unanswered on Horgan and Timmons view.

The lesson I propose that we take away from all of this is a methodological one: when there is an area of an author's view that seems a bit mysterious and they seek to downplay this mystery, it is probably worth taking a closer look. Of course it may be the case that there is nothing more to explain, no deeper problem being obscured from view. However, if the above three examples are any indication, the attempt to downplay the difficulty with a mysterious part of a view may be an indication that this is precisely where we should be looking the most, rather than skipping over it.

The second observation is that the motivation for each author's view, namely, the problem in other views that it seeks to avoid, also helps to clarify the contribution that each view makes to the broader debate over moral objectivity, and to the nature of objectivity. Parfit's view is premised on the conviction that reasons cannot be based in our subjective states, and this is precisely where Street's view falters—she thinks that personal values determine what moral truth is. Street thinks it unlikely that we evolved to track mind-independent Evaluative Truths, and this is where Parfit's view encounters difficulties—the nature of normative truths and how we know them remains unclear on his view. Parfit thinks that there have to be standards for truth that are mind-independent in order to account for error, and this is where Horgan and Timmons view falters—they provide little explanation of the moral standards we might use to judge moral error as

well as the reasons we might give to defend our views. Horgan and Timmons challenge the assumption that moral beliefs must describe a moral reality of some kind, whether non-natural or constructed, and this is another area where Parfit's view falters—moral reasoning seems more about correct detection of normative properties that our claims are supposed to describe on his view than reasoned judgements.

The lesson that I propose we learn from these contrasts is that the diagnosis that each author makes about other views is also a hint about something important that each of them offers to the debate about moral objectivity. From Parfit, we learn the importance of reasons having a source that is external to an individual. Parfit may not have a convincing account of the relationship between natural facts and reasons or how we come to know them, but on this point he seems right: our reasons for acting cannot depend upon our own desires or preferences. Street's view offers a clear example of the problems associated with subjective reasons, namely, that we are left with little to say to those who act immorally but consistently with their own values. I propose that Street's view is thus a valuable test-case to demonstrate the importance of impartial reasons to objectivity: if we're going to successfully account for key features of everyday moral thought and practice such as the reasons that facts about others might give us, we'll need some way to show how reasons are for more than individuals with certain values. The authority of moral claims seems to depend crucially on impartial reasons. Horgan and Timmons agree to some extent with Parfit on this: reasons are grounded externally to individuals, in the facts of one's circumstances. While they face their own difficulties in explaining the external nature of reasons, Horgan and Timmons agree with Parfit that a key part of what makes moral claims objective is that they make demands on us regardless of our subjective opinions and preferences. A key feature of moral objectivity thus seems to be that moral reasons apply to everyone. The importance of external reasons thus also suggests that the aim that all three views have in common is right: moral truth must be invariant with respect to subjective attitudes. If it is not, many of the everyday features that we take to be important seem threatened.

From Street, we learn the importance of being able to interpret and explain moral claims as naturalistically as possible, as things that we can come to know without reliance

on an obscure epistemology. It won't help matters if the source of objectivity is moral truths whose nature we don't quite understand, and which we come to know with an equally mysterious epistemology. While her own epistemology is too simplistic to be credible, her diagnosis of the challenge views like Parfit's face is insightful and reveals the importance of having a defensible epistemology. I propose that the kinds of epistemological challenges Street raises and that I have argued for thus provide a valuable test-case for similar views: moral epistemology cannot be accessible only to a select few with the appropriately formed intuitions. Such narrow access to moral knowledge is unworkable and doesn't reflect the way in which moral decision-making actually works much of the time.

Street also demonstrates the importance of the personal, practical standpoint in moral reasoning; if an action is not entailed by any of the values that a person holds, we need some way of explaining why that person has a reason to act. This requires a more in-depth account of what it is for something to be a reason, and the way in which non-moral facts might give us reasons. Without this explanation, we risk asking each other to simply take our word for it, to accept that they have a reason even if they cannot see it. This results in an unappealing moral authoritarianism and fails to respect each person's ability to reason about morality, and is thus probably best to avoid where possible. When we tell others that they ought to do something, we should have a clear explanation of why we think they have reasons. This is the flip-side of the saying that reasons must be for everyone, or at least not limited to those entailed by one's own values. I take this aspect of Street's view to raise one of the more challenging tests for future views: much more needs to be said about how and why certain facts give everyone a reason for acting, and do so in a way that successfully connects with what an individual is reasonably able to determine from her own point of view.

From Horgan and Timmons, we learn the importance of being open to the possibility that moral claims can be genuine beliefs with cognitive content, yet not descriptive. They may not have the most convincing explanation of what their view implies for moral truth or the relationship between natural facts and reasons, but on this point they seem onto something important: the assumption that all cognitive content is

descriptive seems worth challenging. For one thing, allegiance to this assumption is partly what pushes Parfit and Street to opposite extremes: if moral claims describe facts, and non-natural facts are too mysterious to have plausible knowledge of, then maybe moral claims just describe facts about ourselves. Perhaps if we let go of the idea that moral beliefs describe something (whether natural facts, non-natural normative facts, or facts about what I desire), then another option opens up: moral beliefs evaluate, make judgements about what the natural facts give me reason to do. Since they don't describe, we aren't faced with the challenge of correctly identifying the particular kind of fact they describe.⁹⁶ As I have argued in the previous chapter, this potentially opens up a promising new way of connecting reasons with objectivity, and I think this is worth exploring further.

To summarize this lesson, each author's diagnosis of the problem they seek to avoid in other views reveals something worth keeping in the debate over moral objectivity and some hints at the nature of objectivity. From Parfit, it is worth keeping the idea that reasons must have a source external to individuals, and objectivity seems crucially connected to external reasons and the ability to show how they apply to everyone. From Street, we learn that moral epistemology must not be mysterious, and that our view of reasons must respect the importance of the practical standpoint; and from

⁹⁶ One might argue that naturalism offers another option that I have not covered in my dissertation. For example, Neo-Aristotelian naturalist realists Philippa Foot (2001) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) argue that goodness is best defined for humans as that which conduces to our flourishing, including those activities which are characteristic of our species. Facts about what leads to human flourishing are mind-independent and external in the sense that they obtain regardless of whether we are aware of them or not; their truth is not created by our attitudes or beliefs. However, these types of views will still face the challenge of explaining why the particular natural facts that they take moral claims to describe determine moral truth. For example, if "good" is defined as "conduces to flourishing," but we can think of actions that would promote flourishing yet be immoral (such as killing a third of the human population to prevent over-crowding and resource depletion), then it seems goodness cannot be restricted to the natural facts such as what contributes to flourishing in quite the way they propose. Thus naturalist views which reduce moral concepts like goodness and rightness to natural facts face the burden of Moore's open-question argument: for any naturalistic definition of goodness, one can still ask, "Is it truly good?" Although there is not space here to expand on this line of argument against naturalism in more detail, I take these difficulties to support the idea that tying moral truth too closely to description of any kind is problematic.

Horgan and Timmons, it is worth keeping the idea that evaluative beliefs may be unique and require a new way of thinking about cognitive content.

My final observation is that reasons play a key role in all three views of moral truth and objectivity, both in how our everyday moral discourse and practice are understood as well as in our theorizing about morality. A second and related observation is that all three views make moral reasoning a bit mysterious. On both Parfit and Horgan and Timmons views, natural facts and the reasons they give us for action are front and center. For Parfit they are the reason why a person can have a reason quite apart from their desires; the fact that smoking shortens your life means that you have a reason to stop smoking even if you happen to very much enjoy smoking and care little about living a long life. The natural, non-moral facts about smoking have this power because of the value of living a long life. Yet as we have seen, whenever natural facts like these give us a reason, it is because they also have the normative property of being a reason, never mind what that mysterious property is or how we might come to know about it.

Similarly, Horgan and Timmons claim that the authority of moral claims lies in the non-moral facts about a situation and the reasons these give us for action; claims about moral progress or improvements are also to be understood as moral judgements based on reasons. Finally, they take the fact that we experience ourselves as making moral judgements in a non-arbitrary, impartial, reason-based manner to account for the objectivity that seems implicit in everyday moral thought and discourse. Clearly reasons are important to Cognitivist Expressivism. Yet as we have also seen, the way in which natural facts give us reasons is nearly as obscure on their view as Parfit's, and the standards that we might appeal to in adjudicating reasons is also unclear. This makes it difficult to see how they can confidently claim to account for the objective features of moral thought and experience.

Reasons also play a key role in Street's view, since to say that someone ought to do something on her view is to say that their values give them a reason to do it; their values logically and instrumentally entail this action. The source of reasons is less mysterious on Street's view, since there is no puzzle around which natural facts give us

reasons: whatever we value will determine which natural facts are relevant for us. However, as we have seen, some mystery enters her view when it comes to the way that we come to have values to begin with: she thinks that initial choices of what to value are not, and cannot be made for any reason because there are not standards by which to judge that someone has a reason until values have been chosen.

In addition to this central role in theorizing about morality, reason-giving plays a central role in everyday moral deliberation and discussion about moral truth. As I have argued in the chapters on Parfit as well as Horgan and Timmons views, questions about the objectively right thing to do in everyday life are typically understood and treated as requests to engage in extended reason-giving and deliberation. We restate our reasons for our moral beliefs, examine them, debate about what the non-moral facts about a situation give us reason to do, and so on. We don't get away with appealing to intuitive knowledge of self-evident truths or our own values to decide moral disputes, rather appeal to either is likely to lead us into further reason-giving. Even if we end up with nothing more to say, and run out of reasons, we do not typically take appeal to self-evident truths or personal values to be sufficient to settle the matter. We take a break, and ponder, and come up with more, hopefully better reasons in support of our claims. And even when we realize that people hold very different views for cultural and social reasons, we still feel inclined to offer them reasons why we think they're wrong. We don't treat moral truth as determined by context alone, but as somehow connected to reasons that extend beyond particular circumstances.

The lesson I propose we learn from the centrality of reasons to everyday moral discourse and to theorizing about morality, as well as the fact that all three views leave something unexplained about reasons, is that more work needs to be done on the nature of reasons and their relation to moral truth. Objectivity seems crucially connected to reasons and the practice of reason-giving. Thus a plausible view of moral objectivity should expand on the nature of reasons and reason-giving, and should seek to avoid making the source of reasons too esoteric and mysterious (non-natural facts) or too limited (personal values or a particular normative context). And since morality is a highly practical endeavor, we should pay special attention to moral practice and how matters of

moral truth are dealt with in everyday contexts. I propose that the reliance on reasons, and consistent theme of avoiding either appeal to intuition alone or one's own opinions in everyday practice offers evidence that the right view is somewhere in the middle.

I have argued that Horgan and Timmons view offers a new possible middle path to thinking about the connection between objectivity and reasons. I noted that the practice of reason-giving not only helps to explain why moral judgements are *experienced* as objective, as Horgan and Timmons claim, it also seems to be part of what *makes them objective*, the evidence we give to defend the truth of our claims. In other words, our ability to give impartial, nonarbitrary considerations in favor of our moral claims is a central part of what establishes their objectivity; without being able to do this, we have little recourse to defend the truth or rightness of our moral claims. The centrality of reason-giving to everyday discussions of moral truth seems to confirm this. This central role that reasons play in defending the truth of everyday moral claims suggests that Horgan and Timmons are looking in the right place in building a defense of objectivity in ethics: if reasons are what we rely on most to defend the truth of our moral claims, then an account of how reasons can play this role is a good and important place to start. And as I have argued in the previous chapter, Horgan and Timmons view needs further development in precisely this respect in order to fill out the picture of moral judgement adequately. I think they've made a good start by arguing that the distinctive role of reasons constitutes an important form of moral objectivity, but since that claim comes in a chapter synopsis of a book proposal, we'll have to wait and see how they fill this out. A key part of a successful account of reasons on their view will need to explain in more detail where normativity comes in; why facts give us reasons, and if they see normativity as coming along with those doing the evaluating, how their view avoids sliding into subjectivism or relativism of some kind.

In addition, although there is not space to develop this view in more detail here, one way of further exploring the connection between reasons and objectivity is to develop a better account of the rational activity involved in moral judgement. Neither Parfit's nor Street's view captures moral reasoning or moral judgment all that well. By judgement I don't mean the perceptual kind that Parfit appeals to, in which I judge that a

natural fact has the normative property of giving me a reason. I mean the kind of active reasoning, weighing options, deliberating that is involved in deciding what to do in tough cases. As I argued in the chapter on Parfit, the complicated process of weighing intuitions and scrutinizing our reasons and motives that comprises reflective equilibrium suggests that *judgement* plays a crucial role in determining what to do, yet neither recognizing normative properties nor intuiting self-evident truths seems to require much judgement on Parfit's view. The result is that it seems like *reasoning* drops out at a certain level on Parfit's view: the rational activity of judging that we typically associate with moral decision-making, such as weighing various alternatives, scrutinizing motives, and considering what the demands of justice might be are left behind when consideration of objectivity comes up. Similarly, on Street's view, the rational activity involved in moral judgment is constrained by personal values, and does not give any weight about what the non-moral facts give us reason to do unless they somehow connect with our values. While the outcome and way that we deliberate may look similar on Street's view, her understanding of this process places far less emphasis on our rational assessment of various factors than it does on what our values entail. As a result, discovering what we have reason to do reduces to an extended exercise in figuring out what our values logically and instrumentally entail. As I have argued above, this is a very myopic and narrow view of moral reasoning. Thus I propose that one key component of an adequate account of moral objectivity will be that it helps to fill out the picture of moral judgement better than the three views I have outlined here.

In conclusion, of these three varieties of moral objectivity, none is entirely worth keeping. Each faces difficulties that I have argued pose significant problems for their view, and make their view less than compelling. Nonetheless, each also offers something important to the debate over moral objectivity. A careful examination of the strengths and weaknesses of each view suggests that a successful account of moral objectivity will need to take seriously Parfit's idea that the source of reasons must be external to individuals, Street's conviction that moral truths must not involve a mysterious epistemology or be too removed from the practical standpoint, and Horgan and Timmons idea that evaluative beliefs are unique and may require new ways of thinking about moral truth and cognitive content.

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