

Meta-Ethical Quietism? Wittgensteinian, Relaxed Realism, and Countercultures in Meta-Ethics

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Abstract

Ludwig Wittgenstein has often been called a quietist. His work has inspired a rich and varied array of theories in moral philosophy. Some prominent meta-ethicists have also been called quietists, or 'relaxed' as opposed to 'robust' realists, sometimes with explicit reference to Wittgenstein in attempts to clarify their views. In this chapter, I compare and contrast these groups of theories and draw out their importance for contemporary meta-ethical debate. They represent *countercultures* to contemporary meta-ethics. That is, they reject in different ways one or more of the common assumptions that, whilst not universally shared, shape how to understand and engage in contemporary meta-ethical debate. Despite striking similarities, I argue that the 'quietist' label has obscured the views it is used to describe, the crucial differences between them, and the challenge that they offer to the predominant culture of meta-ethical enquiry. That challenge is this: there are plausible different ways of understanding and doing meta-ethics to those of the meta-ethical orthodoxy. We ignore such heterodoxy at our own peril.

...it seems to me that the primary philosophical task, as usual, is to put a stop to what generally goes on"

R.F. Holland (1980: 229)

Introduction

What we find alien is often what we struggle to understand the most. This difficulty of cross-cultural interaction manifests in philosophy too. When our interlocuters have meta-philosophical or enquiry-shaping assumptions other than our own, we often see them as simply silent on – or 'quiet' about – those questions which grip us. But like any cross-cultural interaction, there is much to be gained in attempting to understand each other. We may, after all, be *radically* mistaken; not only in what we believe, but in what we assume when we do so.

In this paper, I compare two loose groups of views in meta-ethics: those inspired by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein with those so-called 'quietist' or 'relaxed' moral or normative realists. The comparison is motivated, first, by Wittgenstein's popular reception as the quietist-in-chief of philosophy, and how some attempting to clarify the latter group explicitly appeal to

Wittgenstein.¹ Second, both groups are *countercultural*, demurring from common foundational assumptions in contemporary mainstream analytic meta-ethics.² Third, how on some prominent ways of characterising meta-ethical quietism, many Wittgensteinian views qualify as quietist. Fourth, a conviction that what makes these views interesting to mainstream meta-ethics can helpfully be highlighted by attention to the details and differences amongst them.

Given space-constraints, my discussion is necessarily selective and incomplete. Whilst revealing some striking similarities, I argue the ‘quietist’ label has obscured the views it is used to describe, the crucial differences between them, and the challenges they offer to the predominant culture of meta-ethical enquiry. To appreciate them, we must cease characterising these views primarily by their opposition to what *we* already think are the right questions to ask and answer.

As we’ll see, both Wittgensteinian views and those of ‘quietist’ realists reject, and in doing so raise challenges to, various commonly shared assumptions in contemporary analytic meta-ethics. Failing to engage with them imperils any meta-ethical debate built upon assumptions such views reveal as optional and which they challenge us to defend.

I proceed as follows. In §1, I introduce these views and explain how they represent countercultures to contemporary meta-ethics. I turn in §2 to their comparison. I note some of the striking similarities between them, before explaining how more careful attention reveals crucial differences that engagement with them as forms of quietism would obfuscate. In §3, I argue that the foregoing motivates dispensing with the term ‘meta-ethical quietism’ altogether.

§1. Wittgensteinian Moral Philosophy & Relaxed Realism

No philosopher is more closely associated with quietism than Ludwig Wittgenstein.³ A quietist, at first pass, aims to *dissolve*, as opposed to solve, one or more philosophical debates. Once we recognise that a given philosophical debate is based upon some false presupposition, then adopting any view sharing those assumptions to solve it would be confused. Bereft of its false presuppositions, the debate dissolves away.

¹ See, for example, McPherson (2013).

² I borrow ‘countercultural’ here from Harcourt (2013).

³ Perhaps highly inaccurately: see Moyal-Sharrock (2017).

So read, Wittgenstein aimed to dissolve philosophical debates as diseases caused by conceptual and linguistic confusion. Their treatment: the therapy of careful attention to the *grammar* of language – ‘Don’t think, but look!’ (PI §66).⁴ Despite this, and his relative silence on ethics, Wittgenstein inspired a vast array of work in moral philosophy.⁵

Such work shares commitment to some or all of the meta-philosophical views, or the views about language, commonly attributed to (early or later) Wittgenstein. These include, at least, that linguistic meaning either is identical with or solely determined by use, that ordinary language use is ‘in order’ as it is before philosophers take it ‘on holiday’ and thus requires no theoretical defence, that philosophical questions are generated by conceptual and linguistic confusion, and that the appropriate method to address philosophical questions is careful consideration of relevant language use across a variety of representative examples.

In normative ethics, amongst other ways, Wittgenstein’s warnings against a ‘craving for generality’ (BB 17), and a related worry that philosophers ‘restrict themselves to a one-sided diet of examples’ (Mulhall 2002: 295), can be felt behind the ‘anti-theory’ movement in ethics. And Cora Diamond (1995; 1996; 2000) and others take Wittgenstein’s observations about meaning and use to motivate denying that moral life necessarily involves moral judgements or principles; that ethical reflection should broaden to include reflection on literature, imagination, and their moral force.⁶

My concern, however, shall be with Wittgensteinian views in or about meta-ethics. Unlike the forms of ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’ realism with which I shall compare them, the heterogeneity of these Wittgensteinian views is widely acknowledged. I now sketch three loose families I shall discuss.

⁴ Wittgenstein has an idiosyncratic, broad notion of ‘grammar’ encompassing more than just a language’s rules of correct syntactic and semantic use. Though controversial to characterise (see McGinn 2011), I shall understand it here, following Biletzski & Mater (2020), as a: ‘network of rules which determine what linguistic move is allowed as making sense, and what isn’t [...] they express the norms for meaningful language [...] rules of grammar describe how we use words in order to justify and criticize our particular utterances’. It is to these rules we should turn in ‘cases of philosophical perplexity to clarify where language misleads us into false illusions’.

⁵ Except for Wittgenstein’s Lecture on Ethics (1929), ethics is mostly mentioned in the TLP (6.41, 6.421, 6.42) and in his wartime notebooks (1914-1916). This is not to deny Wittgenstein’s remark that the ‘point’ of TLP was ‘ethical’ (Engelmann 1967: 143).

⁶ See also Crary (2007a: 1–3); Glock (2015: 105-106); and Harcourt (2013) for further discussion of this and other Wittgensteinian influence in normative ethics.

The first is *anti-meta-ethical*. Wittgenstein's views, these authors suggest, entail that 'ethics has no particular subject matter' (Diamond 2000: 153; Richter 1996: 252; Hertzberg 2002: 255), that some sentence or word being ethical 'is a matter of use, not subject matter' (Diamond 1996: 244; Mulhall 2002: 306; Richter 1996: 253) and that ethics is a 'pervasive dimension of life rather than a distinguishable region or stand of it' (Mulhall 2002: 304; Conant 2002: 87). These considerations, they continue, motivate seeing meta-ethics – as commonly understood as investigation into the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and psychology of morality – as impossible. What remains is only careful reflection on the multiplicity of ethical uses of language – investigation into its autonomous *grammar* as a pervasive 'dimension of life'. We are apparently forced to accept too that such an investigation cannot hope to achieve first-order ethical neutrality: it would require demarcating the subject matter of ethics and this necessarily involves giving 'expression to one's own ethical interests and concerns, and that can accordingly be challenged by those who do not share those interests and concerns' (Mulhall 2002: 303).

A second, closely related strand provides a Wittgensteinian *re-conception of ethics and meta-ethics*. An exemplar is Paul Johnston (1989; 1999). Johnston takes Wittgenstein's diagnosis of philosophical diseases and linguistic treatment to entail that meta-ethics is the morally neutral, anthropological investigation into the grammar of moral concepts; into the function and significance of moral concepts in human lives that Johnston takes evaluative terms such as 'good' and 'right' to be paradigmatic examples of.⁷ This supposedly follows, as Mulhall puts it, from Wittgenstein's 'anti-theoretical, descriptive methodological stance' and

[...] the thought [...] that understanding any given sector of our life with language is a matter of grasping its human significance—that is, grasping the reasons for which actions of the relevant kind are performed, given the cultural context in which they are embedded—rather than of obtaining a scientific, quasi-causal explanation of the mode of activity [...]. (Mulhall 2002: 296)

Ethics becomes, to Johnston, advocacy for some evaluative stance towards ways of living one's life. Alternative evaluative stances, he suggests, are bedrock reactions; neither ethics

⁷ This might seem a mere terminological variant of the anti-meta-ethical views above. Johnston and the anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians agree that if there is such a thing as meta-ethics it must be morally neutral. The difference: anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians are anti-meta-ethical in the sense that they think such morally neutral investigation is impossible. Johnston thinks that such investigation is possible as the apparently morally neutral, descriptive project of investigating moral language use and its human significance.

nor meta-ethics can investigate the ‘foundations’ of our ethical stances as there are none to be found. We might elaborate upon them in different ways – explaining that we hold them for, say, religious or irreligious reasons – but such details do not provide *independent grounds* for accepting an evaluative attitude. Again, Mulhall nicely puts it,

[...] attempts to secure the agreement of others are not best understood as attempts to support a hypothesis of opinion by invocation of evidence; they are [...] ways of characterising the nature and point of a basic attitude or orientation to the world [...].
(Mulhall 2002: 299)

The third accepts the possibility of meta-ethics as standardly conceived and defends a form of *Wittgensteinian moral realism*. Sabina Lovibond (1983; 2002), John McDowell (1981; 1998), and David Wiggins (1998) develop forms of non-reductive ‘moral realism derived from the later philosophy of Wittgenstein’ (Lovibond 1983: 25).⁸ They aim to establish that there are irreducible objective moral facts and truths – of which we have non-inferential knowledge and which can motivate us to act – by arguing that Wittgenstein’s commitments entail a radical view that *all* apparently propositional claims *are* descriptive truth-apt propositions, whilst arguing against moral non-cognitivism on Wittgensteinian grounds (by, for example, appeal to his remarks on rule-following).⁹ Crucially for us, they also argue that their Wittgensteinian meta-philosophical commitments reveal that such realism *does not* require acceptance of a ‘dubious ontology of moral facts’ (Glock 2015: 113).¹⁰

Consider Sabina Lovibond’s *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (1983). She identifies the moral linguistic categories as those that are of ‘unconditional practical interest to us in virtue of our concern to live a life deserving of praise and not of contempt’ (Lovibond 1983: 52). The later Wittgenstein, Lovibond suggests, provides us with a ‘metaphysically homogeneous’ view of the relationship of language to reality. That is, despite different regions of assertoric discourse, the relationship between language and reality is the same *across them all*:

⁸ Glock (2015) calls these views ‘anti-anti-realism’, following McDowell (1998: viii), to highlight how they aim to lie between what is normally called anti-realism (such as subjectivism or projectivism) and forms of realism that presuppose that realism requires admitting new entities into our ontology.

⁹ See Harcourt (2013) for further discussion.

¹⁰ Another noteworthy strand is those who accept the possibility of meta-ethics as standardly conceived and employ recognisably Wittgensteinian insights in meta-ethical debates. A recent exemplar is Benjamin De Mesel (2015; 2017; 2018a; 2018b).

What Wittgenstein offers us [...] is a homogenous or “seamless” conception of language [...] free from invidious comparisons between different regions of discourse [...] the later Wittgenstein [...] regards all *language-games* as being of “equal value” in the transcendental sense of the *Tractatus*. On this view, the only legitimate role for the idea of “reality” is that in which it is coordinated with [...] the metaphysically neutral idea of “talking about something.” [...] It follows that “reference to an objective reality” cannot be intelligibly set up as a target which some propositions [...] may hit, while others fall short.

Lovibond continues,

If something has the grammatical form of a proposition, then it *is* a proposition: philosophical considerations cannot discredit the way in which we classify linguistic entities for other, non-philosophical, purposes [...] The only way, then in which an indicative statement can fail to describe reality is by *not being true* – i.e. by virtue of reality not being as the statement declares it to be [...] Thus Wittgenstein’s view of language confirms us [...] in the pre-reflective habit of treating as “descriptive,” or fact-stating, all sentences which qualify by grammatical standards as propositions [...] the descriptive function [...] pervade[s] all regions of discourse irrespective of content. (Lovibond 1983: 25–27)

Here, Lovibond claims that the later Wittgenstein takes all uses of language – all language-games – to be such that if we act as if some discourse expresses propositions, then it does. All language just is in the business of talking about reality, and so, for example, moral claims are true just when reality is as they describe and false otherwise. Their truth, then, requires no ‘dubious ontology of moral facts’ – only that moral propositions are true.

Some prominent meta-ethicists have come to be called ‘quietist’ or ‘relaxed’ moral (or, in some cases, more broadly normative) realists.¹¹ These philosophers include Derek Parfit (2011; 2017), Tim Scanlon (2014; 2017), Ronald Dworkin (1996; 2011), Matthew Kramer (2009; 2013; 2017), and John Skorupski (1999; 2010). They all maintain that moral claims express truth-apt beliefs, that some of them are non-relativistically true, that there are moral facts, properties, and

¹¹ As will become clear, I think neither term is apt for this group. But I will mostly use ‘relaxed’ (which is Sarah McGrath’s 2014) in what follows.

relations, and that these moral phenomena are not fully explainable by, reducible to, or identical with natural phenomena.

So presented, these views would be indistinguishable from traditional non-naturalist moral realism as defended by David Enoch, Russ Shafer-Landau, William Fitzpatrick, Michael Huemer, and others. Traditional non-naturalists, however, accept that their metaphysical commitments are *prima facie* problematic. As Enoch (2011: 13) puts it, non-naturalism may lose some ‘plausibility points’ by admitting non-naturalistic phenomena into our ontology. But Enoch and others strive to *defend* non-naturalism from familiar metaphysical and ontological objections such as supervenience, parsimony, and queerness objections.

The relaxed dismiss such objections as failing to even raise a *prima facie* consideration against them. They try to show that non-naturalism faces such objections only if certain claims about the nature of the relationship between ethics and meta-ethics (Dworkin, Kramer) or about the nature of metaphysics and ontology and their consequences for moral metaphysics (Parfit, Scanlon, and Skorupski) are true. But, the relaxed argue, they are not.

Consider, for example, the assumption that non-naturalism requires accepting the existence of non-natural facts, properties, or relations. Such phenomena, some object, cannot be part of a scientifically respectable account of what exists (they are too ‘strange’ or ‘queer’). Thus, we should reject non-naturalism. Parfit, for example, argues that non-naturalism *does not* require adding non-natural phenomena into our ontology because true moral claims can be true without being ‘made to be true by correctly describing, or corresponding to, how things are in some part of reality’ (Parfit 2017: 58–59). If so, this objection does not even raise a *prima facie* consideration against non-naturalism. Rather, the assumption that irreducibly moral truths would require *any* facts as truthmakers is false. If this strategy works with other objections to non-naturalism, then such objections fall away with the falsity of the common assumptions that generate them.

It is notoriously difficult to provide a more informative account of what meta-ethical quietism is that unifies those classified as such. As we will see, I think this is telling. To my knowledge, characterisations of meta-ethical quietism in the literature tend not to mention the

above Wittgensteinian views.¹² But on most prominent accounts of what meta-ethical quietism is supposed to be, these Wittgensteinian views will qualify.

For example, Kremm & Schafer (2017: 645) suggest that a view is ‘metaethically quietist insofar as it rejects certain metaethical questions as unworthy of philosophical debate’, when these questions are interpreted as anything other than ethical questions. Anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians thus qualify as quietists: they reject all meta-ethical debate as failing to recognise the lack of a distinctive moral vocabulary, as mistakenly seeing ethics as some distinctive region of enquiry like the philosophy of mind or language, and that ethics has no distinctive subject matter. Wittgensteinian moral realists will also qualify, given, for example, Lovibond’s rejection of debates over whether ethical claims express propositions, and whether moral facts or properties exist as irrelevant to moral realism. Johnston’s view, too, will count as quietist. On Johnston’s view, meta-ethical debates between, say, naturalists and non-naturalists mistakenly assume there are some foundations of morality philosophical investigation can uncover. There are no foundations to find: meta-ethical enquiry can only aspire to an anthropological account of the role and significance of moral language in our lives – of what we *do* with ethical language.

Or consider Tristram McPherson’s suggestion that quietists *simpliciter* aim to ‘dissolve a debate or apparent theoretical problem by showing it rests on mistaken presuppositions’ (McPherson 2013: 4277). Again, anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians will count as quietists by denying the possibility of meta-ethics and any apparent theoretical problems it aims to solve. Johnston’s revised understanding of meta-ethics suggests that traditional meta-ethical debates rest on false assumptions about what philosophy can hope to achieve in investigating morality. And again, taking Lovibond, Wittgensteinian moral realists take it that we can dissolve debates over whether moral language involves expressing propositions (or, e.g., whether non-reductive moral realism requires admitting new entities into our ontology) by, crudely put, highlighting how these questions presuppose a false view of the relationship between language and reality.

I suspect all the above will appear to most contemporary meta-ethicists as anathema. This appearance evidences their being *countercultural*. By ‘culture’, I mean the predominant ways of understanding and doing meta-ethics, characterised by a loose constellation of meta-philosophical or enquiry-shaping assumptions that, in the manner of family-resemblance,

¹² An exception is van Roojen (2015: 275–276), who briefly compares McDowell’s meta-ethical views to Parfit’s and Scanlon’s. Skorupski (2010: 434–436) calls McDowell a ‘quietist’ but means this to indicate that McDowell denies the distinction between normative and factual propositions.

members *typically* share as *markers* of membership in that way of engaging in and understanding the discipline. The above views are countercultural in that they reject some meta-philosophical or enquiry-shaping assumptions that are typically – though not necessarily universally – shared amongst those working in contemporary meta-ethics.¹³

Of course, there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for one's work being part of the predominant culture of contemporary meta-ethics. But some common assumptions include:

- (A) There is some distinction between ethics and meta-ethics.
- (B) There is some autonomy between ethics and meta-ethics, such that at least some views in each sub-discipline do not affect the plausibility of answers in the other.
- (C) There is some (even if elusive) distinction between ethical and non-ethical language.
- (D) Moral metaphysical questions are substantive, non-trivial questions about the nature of reality distinct from first-order ethical questions.
- (E) Neo-Quineanism in meta-ontology: there is only one notion of existence, that 'existence' is primitive, that existential quantification is ontologically committing, that there is one set of criteria for theory choice in metaphysics regardless of subject matter, and that we determine what entities we should accept by assessing general theories according to one set of criteria for theory choice and then accepting the existence of whatever the best supported theory quantifies over.
- (F) Non-Meinongianism: it is false that there are non-existent objects, properties, or relations.
- (G) Non-naturalistic moral realism requires the admittance of entities into our ontology that are inconsistent with naturalism about reality.
- (H) There are notions of 'the world' or 'reality' which we can fruitfully appeal to when engaging in moral metaphysics and ask how to 'locate' morality 'in the world'.
- (I) The surface grammar of moral judgements as truth-apt propositions may be misleading and it is intelligible question whether they are so.

¹³ Another way of being countercultural: rejecting some claim on considered grounds that strike those who typically work on that (or related) claim(s) as irrelevant or 'off the table'. Consider Anscombe's denial of it being an open philosophical question whether killing the innocent is ever morally permissible on the grounds that to think so 'shows a corrupt mind' (Anscombe 1958: 17). Anscombe is making a point that strikes most modern ethicists as simply missing the point; she would respond that it is *us* who fail to see *her* point.

Again, this motley group are *not* universally shared assumptions amongst contemporary meta-ethicists.¹⁴ For example, Simon Blackburn (1984; 1993; 1998) and Allan Gibbard's (2003) quasi-realism famously rejects some of the above.¹⁵ Nevertheless, they help us to see, first, why every Wittgensteinian view above strikes most meta-ethicists as deeply alien to how they conceive of and engage in meta-ethical enquiry. Those in the anti-meta-ethical group deny (A) and (C). Johnston rejects, at least, (D), taking meta-ethical questions to concern the autonomous grammar of moral language use. And Wittgensteinian moral realists reject (E), (G), (H), and (I).

Second, they help reveal what some so-called relaxed realists have in common. Parfit, Scanlon, and Skorupski reject at least one feature of (E) and reject (G): they defend alternative views about the nature of metaphysics and ontology and take these to reveal that traditional objections to non-naturalist moral realism are confused. Skorupski also rejects (F), arguing that there are non-existent (or 'irreal') objects and relations. Dworkin rejects (A), (D), and (G), rejecting any distinction between ethics and meta-ethics, and suggesting that all (non-naturalistic) moral realism requires is the truth of various irreducibly ethical claims. Kramer distinguishes between ethics and meta-ethics, but his distinction is highly revisionary: he sees meta-ethical questions as merely ethical questions asked at a high level of abstraction. So, he rejects (D). He further maintains that once we accept deflationism about moral truths, we should also think (G) false – all that non-naturalist moral realism requires is the truth of irreducibly normative claims.

This points to some similarities, both between and within each group. But it is ultimately an impressionistic sketch. Whilst looking more carefully, recall that Wittgenstein is supposed to be the chief *quietist* of philosophy; the arch-opponent of philosophical theorising. Similarly, by calling them 'quietists', some have suggested that the relaxed wish to avoid substantive meta-ethical theorising (at least as anything other than first-order ethical theorising). Are these claims accurate? And is there any sense in which all these theories are properly considered either motivated by or themselves forms of quietism?

§2. Look...Then Look Again!

¹⁴ In particular, much meta-ethical debate proceeds with more or less silence on meta-metaphysical/meta-ontological questions, so sometimes it is not clear what assumptions are being made. But often neo-Quinean assumptions, pervasive in other metaphysical debates, are clearly operating in meta-ethics – partly evidenced by what views are taken to be live-options and/or intelligible (as we'll see below).

¹⁵ This is no objection to (A)-(I) being amongst the common markers of the mainstream culture of meta-ethics. Blackburn presented quasi-realism as trying to show that there was space for a theory that claims all the attractions of what would normally be called 'realism', and those of expressivist non-cognitivism, simultaneously, thus suggesting some common assumptions in meta-ethics that ruled such a view out mistaken.

My discussion will centre around the possibility of meta-ethics, non-naturalist moral realism and ontological commitment, and end with some other points of interest.

§2.1. The Possibility of Meta-Ethics

A striking similarity between some Wittgensteinian moral philosophers and some relaxed realists is that they *deny the possibility of meta-ethics*. That is, they deny that there is or could be such a thing as meta-ethics standardly conceived as the investigation into the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and psychology of morality. Specifically, Dworkin infamously argues there are no meta-ethical claims and theories. Kramer denies the possibility of meta-ethics as some form of morally detached theorising into the nature of morality.¹⁶ Anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians such as Cora Diamond, Stephen Mulhall, Duncan Richter, and James Conant, agree.

Also striking is that the arguments offered for this radical claim are, *prima facie*, very similar. Consider those offered by Dworkin and Mulhall. They offer *collapse* arguments.¹⁷ These are arguments that suggest, first, that meta-ethics is supposed to be in some sense neutral regarding ethics and, second, that any attempt to engage in meta-ethics will fail to be so neutral. Thus, any attempt at meta-ethics *collapses* into ethical debate.

Dworkin argues that there are no ‘second-order, non-evaluative’ truths about morality (Dworkin 2011: 11). Take ‘torture is morally wrong’. Next, consider these seemingly meta-ethical claims about the claim that torture is wrong: the act of torture has the *normative property* of moral wrongness, that torture is morally wrong is *true stance-independently*, and that the property of moral wrongness is *not reducible* to any natural property. Dworkin call these ‘further claims’ (Dworkin 1996: 67)

For any further claim, Dworkin asks: first, is there a reading of that claim as *only* a first-order ethical claim? Second, if so, can the claim in question be construed as *neutral* regarding which first-order claims are true? According to Dworkin, for *all* seemingly meta-ethical claims, the answer to the first question is yes and to the second is no. Take the claim that the act of

¹⁶ Kramer (2020) explains how he is offering a ‘reconception’ of questions about ethical objectivity as substantive ethical questions, albeit at a high level of abstraction, and happily calls these ‘meta-ethical’ questions.

¹⁷ See Forcehimes (2015) for helpful discussion of collapse arguments and specifically Sumner’s (1967) argument.

torture has the property of moral wrongness. Dworkin maintains that this claim is ‘nothing but clarifying or emphatic or metaphorical restatements or elaborations of’ the claim that torture is morally wrong (Dworkin 1996: 97–99).

Once interpreted as moral claims, these allegedly meta-ethical claims fail to remain neutral regarding ethics by either being, or entailing, ethical claims:

The [...] proposition that there are moral properties in the universe [...] is or entails [...] that some acts really are unjust, or some people really are good, or something of the sort. So read [...] a skeptic who denied it would hardly be neutral toward substantive morality. (Dworkin 1996: 100)

Of course, a seemingly meta-ethical claim being interpretable as an ethical one does not reveal that it *must* be read as ethical. But Dworkin appeals to:

(Neutrality): A theory or claim is meta-ethical *only if* it is irrelevant to the justification of ethical theories or purely ethical claims.¹⁸

If true, (Neutrality) entails that any purportedly meta-ethical claim or theory which stands in an epistemic supporting or undermining relation towards either ethical theories or purely ethical claims – i.e., ethical claims that do not have their truth depend upon some descriptive facts – must *itself* be an ethical claim in disguise. And if every seemingly meta-ethical claim, as Dworkin suggests, does stand in such relations to at least one ethical claim, then meta-ethics is impossible and merely ethics in disguise.

Mulhall’s collapse argument emerges in a discussion of Johnston’s apparently Wittgensteinian conception of ethics as advocacy for a ‘form or manner of living’ and meta-ethics as an ethically neutral ‘conceptual task [...] of accurately characterising the distinctive grammar of moral judgements and action’ (Mulhall 2002: 299).

Rush Rhees, Mulhall begins, once reported that Wittgenstein thought Goering’s ‘Recht is das, was uns gefällt’ (‘Right is whatever we want it to be’) was ‘a kind of ethics. It is helpful in silencing objections to a certain attitude. And it should be considered along with other ethical

¹⁸ Found throughout Dworkin (1996; 2011), see McPherson (2008: 3-4); Toh (2013: 464-465) for discussion. (Neutrality) can be read as either a *hypothesis* about meta-ethical theories/claims, or as a *constraint* on what theories/claims are meta-ethical. Dworkin intends the latter.

judgements and discussions, in the anthropological study of ethical discussions which we may have to conduct' (Rhees 1972: 101–102).

Johnston appears, however, committed to denying that Goering's claim is 'ethical' at all (Johnston 1989: 111–112). On Johnston's view, it is a grammatical or anthropological observation (that is, a correct meta-ethical claim) that belief in an objective set of standards for the moral evaluation of attitudes and actions – which Johnston contrasts with the attitude of Goering's – is part of what makes a claim or attitude 'ethical'.

The problem: Johnston suggests there is a sharp distinction between substantive ethical commitments and advocacy for them (ethics) and neutral, grammatical, or anthropological investigations into ethical language and its function in our lives (meta-ethics). But for neutrality, Johnston seems required to acknowledge (as Wittgenstein did) that Goering's remark expresses an ethical stance. And this threatens, Mulhall (2002: 303) claims, to force Johnston to expand his view of what can count as 'ethical' to 'become capacious to the point of emptiness'. If, instead, Johnston suggests that there are some constraints on what makes some term or concept count as ethical, such that Goering's remarks are disqualified by lacking commitment to objective moral standards, then 'one will find that one's account has begun to move on first-order ground, becoming more and more explicitly dependent on a [...] substantive, personal ethical stance' (Mulhall 2002: 303).

Mulhall takes this problem for Johnston to suggest that, in general, 'there is and can be no such thing as meta-ethics' (Mulhall 2002: 303). Mulhall explicitly assumes something like (Neutrality) and takes it to be violated in attempts to do meta-ethics as standardly conceived.¹⁹ But his reason for thinking that meta-ethical neutrality will be violated is importantly distinct from Dworkin's, and, in fact, generates reason – should we find the Wittgensteinian insights they depend upon persuasive – to reject Dworkin's collapse argument.

Mulhall's argument seems to be this. For some enquiry to count as meta-ethical, it must be morally neutral. To engage in meta-ethics, we must demarcate the subject matter of ethics for meta-ethical enquiry to investigate. Any attempt at such demarcation, however, will always involve 'expression of one's own ethical interests and concerns, and that can accordingly be

¹⁹ Mulhall (2002: 299–305) makes this presumption of required neutrality of some kind explicit throughout. For an independent argument against Mulhall's collapse argument, see De Mesel (2018a: Chapter 4).

challenged by those who do not share those interests and concerns' (Mulhall 2002: 303) and requires 'deployment of the concept(s) under analysis' (Mulhall 2002: 304). If meta-ethics requires demarcating some ethical subject matter, this will necessarily involve making ethical commitments, and if meta-ethical enquiry requires complete ethical neutrality, then meta-ethics seems impossible.

Dworkin, however, has an entirely different rationale for accepting (Neutrality),

[...] the principle of moral epistemology I called Hume's Principle. This holds that no series of propositions about how the world is, as a matter of scientific or metaphysical fact, can provide a successful case on its own – without some value judgements hidden in the interstices – for any conclusion about what ought to be the case. Hume's Principle seems to me obviously true.

(Dworkin 2011: 44)²⁰

Dworkin is appealing to,

(Autonomy): No descriptive claim(s) *alone* can provide justification for, or against, first-order normative theories or purely normative claims.²¹

The thought is that if (Autonomy) is true, then since it entails no descriptive claim can *alone* affect the justification of first-order ethical theories or pure normative claims, and if purportedly meta-ethical claims do affect such justification (as Dworkin argues they do), then these purportedly meta-ethical theories must be normative ones in disguise.²²

Such a motivation for meta-ethical neutrality, however, involves assumptions that anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians like Mulhall reject. Dworkin's (Autonomy) assumes that we can distinguish between descriptive and ethical language by their content (namely, whether they involve judgements of value or not). Mulhall denies this, taking whether descriptive language to be ethical to depend upon how it is *used*: 'what makes a stretch of discourse [...] moral [...] is a matter of use, not properties denoted or subject-matter (Mulhall 2002: 306). Diamond concurs,

²⁰ Dworkin (2011: 19) calls this principle the 'anthem' of his chapters against any ethics/meta-ethics distinction.

²¹ This is one of several autonomy principles regarding ethics and meta-ethics (see Maguire 2015; 2017).

Importantly, it is not only a logical inference barrier from descriptive to moral or other normative claims. It also acts as a barrier for *other* epistemic supporting (or undermining) relations between descriptive claims *alone* to normative ones. The principle is an interpretation of Hume's (1985: 521) infamous is/ought passage.

²² Assuming that meta-ethical claims and theories are comprised solely of descriptive claims. This is controversial but *prima facie* plausible in the case of, for example, moral metaphysical claims.

claiming that the moral character of a sentence ‘arises not through its content but from its use on particular occasions’ (Diamond 1996: 248) and that, as Lovibond glosses Diamond, that ‘moral thought is like irony or humour in being identifiable not by the occurrence of any special vocabulary, but only through a more holistic appreciation of the spirit of an utterance’ (Lovibond 2002: 38).

If Dworkin’s (Autonomy) depends upon a distinction between the descriptive and the ethical by appeal to subject matter, then it stands in conflict with Wittgensteinian motivations for the denial of the possibility of meta-ethics. If we accept the lesson Mulhall, Diamond, and others teach, however, then despite agreement with Dworkin on the required neutrality of meta-ethics and its impossibility, they provide a response to Dworkin’s collapse argument that undermines the descriptive/normative distinction it relies upon. Those sympathetic to collapse arguments may have thought then that they had two good arguments here to appeal to in denying the possibility of meta-ethics. But one cannot have both. Nevertheless, they offer two interestingly different challenges to the possibility of meta-ethics.²³

§2.2. Non-Naturalist Moral Realism & Ontological Commitment

It is commonplace for ‘robust’ or traditional moral non-naturalists to suggest that ‘taking morality seriously’ requires positing *sui generis* moral facts, properties, and relations ‘in the world’ alongside our otherwise naturalistically respectable ontological commitments.

Consider, for example, David Enoch. In outlining his rejection of ‘quietist’ views, Enoch notes that, unlike them, he has:

[...] no [...] illusions. My Robust Realism wears its ontological commitment on its sleeve. I believe that if we are to take morality seriously, we must go for [...] an ontologically committed view, precisely as understood by some of the traditional objections to such a view. The thing for us realists to do, I believe, is not to disavow ontological commitment and pretend that this solves (or dissolves) problems for our realism. Rather, we must [...] defend the rather heavy commitments of our realism. (Enoch 2011: 7)

²³ Dworkin and the anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians are relying upon a conception of meta-ethics as wholly morally neutral that most contemporary meta-ethicists deny (De Mesel 2018a: Chapter 4 also notes this). This conception was common in the first half of the twentieth century. But it is much more common now to think that there are at least some ethical and meta-ethical debates that do not have immediate consequences for one another; the challenge becomes to try to establish which these are. I explain this in response to a recent attempt to trouble the standardly-cast divide by Berker (2018) in Akhlaghi (2021).

Another striking similarity between Wittgensteinian moral realists and all relaxed realists is that they maintain that Enoch (and others) are mistaken in thinking that belief in objective, irreducibly moral truths requires admitting irreducibly moral phenomena into our ontology. Enoch's view is commonly held. But it is false.

Consider, again, Lovibond's suggestion that the later Wittgenstein's 'seamless' view of language and reality reveals that for propositions to serve a descriptive function in language requires, as Diamond puts it, 'no metaphysical underpinnings [...] indicative sentences are all equally descriptions of reality'. This apparently allows us to 'see "moral facts" in a metaphysically unexciting way, as facts that we become aware of in perception and report in moral discourse' (Diamond 1996: 221). The only way an indicative sentence can fail to describe reality, on Lovibond's view, is for it to not be true, and not that there fail to exist some moral properties or relations 'in reality' to make them true.

In denying that accepting irreducibly moral truths requires incurring ontological commitment to *sui generis* moral phenomena, this attempt at 'ontological innocence' has created the illusion that many or all relaxed realists are defending some version of the same view.²⁴ They are not. Space-constraints prohibit my doing them justice, but I shall explain why Scanlon's, Skorupski's, and Parfit's views – which each set out to defang metaphysical and ontological objections to irreducibly moral (or normative) truths – are importantly distinct.²⁵

Scanlon defends a 'general view of ontological questions' (Scanlon 2014: 15). This meta-ontological view aims to show that accepting true, irreducibly normative (including moral) claims are not inconsistent with 'plausible views about "what there is"' (Scanlon 2014: 17).

On Scanlon's view, there are distinct *domains*, that is, subject matters, such as the mathematical, the natural, and the normative. In each domain, we incur ontological commitment the same way: taking a set of statements, 'translating these statements into the language of first-order logic, and then determining what existential claims follow from these statements' (Scanlon 2014: 17). Thus, Scanlon accepts W.V.O. Quine's influential claim that existential quantification (in first-order logic) is ontologically committing.

²⁴ See, for example, Böddeling (2020), Donnellson (2018), Veluwenkamp (2017). Anecdotally, this is also an extremely common view that has been repeatedly voiced to me for years.

²⁵ In other work, I clarify these differences beyond what space permits here.

However, Scanlon claims that each domain has its own first-order standards of reasoning that settle the truth-value of ontological claims within that domain, both in the sense of telling us what makes it the case that some ontological claim is true, and in the sense of providing the condition(s) that justifies our belief in that claim. Whilst claims within domains may conflict, if the claim in question does not conflict with a claim in the natural domain entailed by its own standards, and the claim is entailed by the standards of the domain it is about, that claim is true. This, crucially, is true of questions about *what exists*.

Scanlon gives us, then, a domain-based meta-ontological theory that rejects the idea that metaphysics concerns what '*the world*' contains, in any meaningful sense of "the world" (Scanlon 2014: 24). Whether numbers exist is determined by asking whether mathematical claims that quantify over numbers – say, 'there is a prime number between 3 and 7' – are true by the standards of mathematical reasoning. If so, then numbers exist and any questions about where to 'fit' numbers into our general picture of 'the world' simply fail to understand ontological questions. The same is true of *normative* claims. Do reasons exist? Is it true, by the standards of reasoning about normative questions, that 'there is a reason to avoid suffering?' If so, then such a reason exists.

Scanlon thus denies that the truth of irreducibly normative (and moral) claims requires the existence of anything 'in the world' to make them true. Instead, the standards of the normative domain settle what, for example, moral reasons there are. To think otherwise is, on his view, to be confused about the nature of ontological and metaphysical questions.

Parfit defends what he calls 'non-realist cognitivism' (and previously called 'non-metaphysical cognitivism'). In Parfit's words,

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

He continues that, on his view, normative (and certain other) claims concern phenomena that exist only in a 'non-ontological' sense of 'exist', failing to have any 'ontological status' (Parfit

2011: 487). Parfit's view is notoriously difficult to characterise further. But note that non-realist cognitivism rejects,

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

Many have noted that this is likely at least a rejection of a correspondence theory of truth whilst remaining unable to clarify the view in an even *prima facie* plausible way.²⁶ I argue at length elsewhere, however, that rejection of the above claim is best understood by appeal to truthmaker theory as follows (Akhlaghi Forthcoming).

Truthmaker theory attempts to capture an intuition that truth is not a fundamental feature of the world, that is, that what is true asymmetrically depends upon reality.²⁷ The proposition that the rose is red, for example, seems to be made true by the world by, say, the existence of a red rose, whilst the existence of the rose does not depend upon the truth of the claim that the rose is red.

Truthmaker theorists argue that to adequately capture this asymmetric dependence we need to admit of a metaphysical *truthmaking relation*, *truthbearers* (for example, propositions), and *truthmakers* (e.g., states of affairs, properties, tropes, *inter alia*). One perennial debate amongst truthmaker theorists, however, is over this: are there some truths that are true without there being anything that exists which makes them true? Truthmaker maximalists say no; all truths require truthmakers. Truthmaker anti-maximalists say yes. For example, don't negative existentials, propositions about the past or future, or truths about what is necessary or possible plausibly look like truthmaker-less truths?

I've argued that non-realist cognitivism is best understood as adopting truthmaker theory and truthmaker anti-maximalism. That is, as maintaining, first, that there is a metaphysical truthmaking relation. Second, that this relation obtains between only some truths; some truths, for example those about the natural world, may be made true, whilst others do not require the existence of anything to be true. I also suggest non-realist cognitivism accept a truthmaking-

²⁶ See, for example, Suikkanen (2017). Denial of (Alethic Realism) is what is 'non-realist' about non-realist cognitivism.

²⁷ See Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006) for helpful overview.

based account of ontological commitment: what commits us to the existence of something is not existential quantification but, instead, whether, according to one's theory, the existence of x is required for the truth of a claim in one's theory. Since the theory claims moral and other normative claims are true without truthmakers, it avoids positing any non-natural facts, properties, or relations at all.

Skorupski understands moral and other normative claims as concerning reason relations. Reasons, to Skorupski, are facts that count in favour of an action, a belief, or an affection. Such facts are ontologically unproblematic. The worry, instead, is that Skorupski wants to accept that there are irreducibly normative reason relations (that is, relations not reducible to naturalistic facts about, say, desire-satisfaction) that can obtain between such facts and, say, actions they count in favour of. This, *prima facie*, is an ontological commitment that faces well-discussed objections.

But Skorupski aims to 'show that reason relations differ from other relations in ways that can be summarised by saying that [...] reason relations are *irreal*.' (Skorupski 2010: 420). Skorupski's resulting view, called 'irrealist cognitivism', involves adopting a meta-ontological framework perhaps most unfamiliar to contemporary meta-ethicists. Namely, a form of Meinongianism: the view that there are non-existent objects to which we can refer to, quantify over, and which enjoy properties.²⁸

To explain, Skorupski argues against what he calls the 'semantic condition', the claim that 'whatever can be thought or talked about is real' (Skorupski 2010: 421). On Skorupski's view, the only condition that whatever can be thought or talked about must meet is an 'anchoring' condition that 'we know and can communicate to each other what we are talking about' (Skorupski 2010: 423). All this entails, Skorupski claims, is that whatever we can refer to is *actual*.

But, Skorupski continues, actuality and *existence* are distinct. Anything that we can meaningfully talk to one another about is actual – be it fictional objects, reason relations, cats, or dogs. But existence, to Skorupski, is a property that some actual things have and some lack. That property, he argues, is captured by the 'causal condition' – a synthetic identity claim that x exists if and only if x has causal standing (Skorupski 2010: 426–428). Merely quantifying over something thus comes with no ontological commitment; one is merely picking out something to

²⁸ Most associated with Alexius Meinong (1904) and his student Ernst Mally (1912); see Priest (2016) for discussion.

discuss. To commit ourselves to the existence of what we are discussing requires suggesting that it has causal standing.

This means, finally, that Skorupski admits of a distinction amongst what is actual: those things that are real (that is, have existence through causal standing) and *irreal* objects (things we can meaningfully talk about, and which have properties, but lack causal standing). The irreal objects, to Skorupski, themselves bifurcate into the *non-objective irreal*s (fictional objects and objects of thoughts which we mistakenly think exist) and *objective irreal*s. Amongst the objective irreal, Skorupski argues, we find reason relations.²⁹ And the reason relations are the actual counting in favour of relations between facts and what they count in favour of – actual, but non-existent.³⁰

Finally, the truth of normative propositions about objectively irreal reason relations do not require anything to make them true, in the sense truthmaker theorists intend. Skorupski, instead, offers a *deflationary* understanding of all ‘makes true’ talk:

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

We should now be able to see, then, first, how Wittgensteinian moral realists and relaxed realists alternatively challenge Enoch’s claim above. The Wittgensteinian moral realists employ a view of the nature of language and reality to undermine it. These relaxed realists, by contrast, defend general views about the nature of metaphysics and ontology and argue they show Enoch’s claim mistaken.

²⁹ As Skorupski (2010: 424) notes, his view is not that irreal objects have some ‘shadowy form of being’. This is to read him as a ‘modes-of-being Meinongian’ which, as Matti Eklund (2006: 328) highlights, is how most who reject Meinongianism understand the view. Rather, Skorupski’s view is that irreal objects, which have properties and which we can meaningfully discuss, have no existence or being at all (analogous to Priest’s (2016) Noneism).

³⁰ Abstracta, on Skorupski’s view, are not their own class of irreal. Instead, Skorupski suggests abstracta are reducible to reason relations in two steps: first, talk of abstracta is reducible to talk of what is possible and, second, taking *possibility* itself to be normative such that to say that ‘it is possible that *p*’ means that ‘there is not sufficient reason [...] to exclude the supposition that *p*’ (Skorupski 2010: 430).

But secondly, we can dispel any illusion that Parfit's, Scanlon's, or Skorupski's views – or those of Wittgensteinian moral realists – are in any helpful sense versions of the same theory. Whilst their views may all avoid ontological commitment to non-natural moral and normative phenomena, *how and why* they do so are *very* different from one another.³¹

The exciting upshot: there are *many* ways of challenging the assumption that non-naturalistic moral realism requires, as Glock put it, 'a dubious ontology of moral facts'. First, Lovibond's Wittgensteinian moral realism accepts:

(Language-Reality) All seemingly proposition-stating discourse is so and is so without requiring the positing of entities into our ontology. Normative statements concern truth-apt, irreducibly normative propositions that are objectively true when true.

Scanlon's relaxed realism accepts:

(Domain-Based Metaphysics) The criteria appropriate for metaphysical theorising about *x* are domain specific; there is no one set of criteria for theory choice in metaphysics and ontology. The criteria for the normative domain support a form of non-naturalistic moral and normative realism and undermine common objections to such views.

Parfit's non-realist cognitivism alternatively adopts:

(Truthmaker Anti-Maximalism) There is a truthmaking relation. Some truths have truthmakers whilst others do not; amongst the truthmaker-less truths are irreducibly normative propositions.

And, finally, Skorupski's irrealist cognitivism accepts:

(Meinongianism) There are non-existent objects, to which we can refer and quantify over, which have properties. Amongst the non-existent objects are irreducibly normative reason relations.

³¹ Wittgensteinians may find Skorupski's (2010: 442–457) suggestion that Wittgenstein's rule-following remarks generate an 'open question' argument, that apparently suggests that the very idea of a normative fact is 'inherently unintelligible', of interest.

Of course, many may think these views implausible. But even the sketches of them above suggest that they are at least *prima facie* plausible. As such, they each variably raise a challenge to our common ways of understanding a cornerstone of meta-ethical debate: that non-naturalism is incompatible with naturalism about reality more generally.

§2.3. Other Points of Interest, and a Wittgensteinian Worry for Scanlon

Lovibond and Scanlon both reject the idea that there is a fruitful notion of ‘the world’ or ‘reality’ that we can understand metaphysical debate in terms of. It is worth highlighting, though, that their rationale for doing so is importantly distinct. Lovibond takes her Wittgensteinian views to ‘smooth out’ all apparent differences in the function of assertoric discourse. This suggests that thinking metaphysical enquiry required to see if some region of discourse ‘hits the target’ of reference to ‘reality’ is fundamentally confused. Scanlon, by contrast, relies upon thinking that domains have different standards of reasoning that determine the truth of ontological claims regarding them. This apparently suggests the world is ‘merely disjunctive’, removing any general criteria for theory choice we can appeal to when trying to determine what exists ‘in the world’.

Another similarity amongst Wittgensteinian views and many relaxed realists is frequent analogy-drawing with mathematics or other domains. Again, though, it is noteworthy that this is done for different purposes. For example, Diamond (1996) appeals to Wittgenstein’s remarks on what makes statements mathematical statements. This is done to challenge Lovibond’s ‘seamless’ view of language and reality, and to support thinking that what makes some statements ethical – as Wittgenstein appears to suggest regarding mathematics – is not their subject matter but their use. Scanlon, alternatively, assumes that we can see what some statements are about from their subject matter, using analogies with mathematics to help make his general meta-ontological view seem plausible. And I’ve argued elsewhere that Parfit’s frequent use of such analogies should be read as trying to provide partners-in-innocence to justify believing normative truths lack truthmakers (Akhlaghi Forthcoming).

Finally, it is worth noting that no doubt many Wittgensteinians will see the philosophical machinery behind views like Scanlon’s, Parfit’s, and Skorupski’s – truthmaking, Meinongianism, *inter alia* – as poisonous treatments that worsen philosophical diseases. Such objections are deep and reflection on them requires another occasion. But there is another objection in the vicinity worth mentioning here.

Scanlon (2017: 880–881) clarifies that all he means by ‘domain’ is a subject matter and that we can delineate various subject matters by attention to concepts they tend to concern (for example, *reasons* for the normative or *numbers* for the mathematical). The anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinian views we’ve discussed raise a novel challenge to the notion apparently fundamental to Scanlon’s view: is there a normative *domain*? These Wittgensteinians may press: isn’t what makes a concept an ethical one not its subject matter but its use in various language games? And isn’t ethics, they may continue, a ‘pervasive dimension of life’ and not a particular ‘region or strand’ of it? If so, perhaps this Wittgensteinian insight – if it is one – is enough to deeply trouble Scanlon’s view.

§3. Whither Quietism?

Despite their striking similarities, I believe we should abandon the term ‘quietism’ to describe any of the above views, for five reasons.

First, the term ‘quietism’ obscures the differences between the views it is used to describe. As I’ve argued, there are *crucial* differences between, for example, Parfit, Scanlon, and Skorupski. These are often not highlighted, with some writing as if their views must be versions of the same theory.³² This is partly the fault of some relaxed realists.³³ But it is also a confusion that is liable to be continued by insisting that these philosophers are articulating tokens of a *type* of theory called meta-ethical quietism.

Second, ‘quietism’ encourages an understanding of ‘quietist’ theories as *objectionably* refusing to answer questions many are concerned with. This mistake is exemplified by Ralph Wedgwood (2007). Discussing McDowell and Parfit as examples of meta-ethical quietists, he suggests that they reject ‘the demand for a substantive philosophical explanation of normative thought and normative truth’ (Wedgwood 2007: 4), and that it is ‘a mistake to attempt to offer any substantive or illuminating explanation in this area of philosophy. The only task for such a quietist form of realism is to diagnose the errors that lead philosophers into the mistake of anti-

³² This is not to say that all fall into this trap; see, for example, Enoch (2011: 121–133)

³³ For example, Parfit (2017: 60, 60 fn. 59) suggests Scanlon’s view is a version of his own and claims that Skorupski’s view ‘partly overlap(s)’ with his own. I think ‘relaxed realism’ is best used to refer to Scanlon’s view, and ‘non-realist cognitivism’ and ‘irrealist cognitivism’ for Parfit’s and Skorupski’s views respectively. But I will use ‘relaxed’, as I have above, to refer to the group here for ease.

realism. In that sense, this sort of realism is a purely negative or critical theory: in this domain, there is simply no positive theory to be given.’ (Wedgwood 2007: 7).

The previous section has illustrated how if *this* is what is meant by ‘meta-ethical quietism’, there are arguably no meta-ethical quietists. Every so-called quietist offers a substantial philosophical defence of their rejection of some common meta-ethical questions or debates. Consider Parfit’s denial of normative truthmakers, Scanlon’s rejection of domain-independent criteria for theory choice in metaphysics, or Skorupski’s denial that there are no non-existent phenomena. These claims may all be false. But they are not refusals to provide anything that we might recognisably call a ‘positive theory’ of the nature of morality and normativity more generally.

This is true even of views that reject meta-ethics *simpliciter* as standardly conceived. Dworkin’s rejection, for example, depends upon his (Neutrality) and (Autonomy) claims, which are substantial claims he defends and employs in arguing that the only positive theory here is one we can arrive at through normative theorising. Anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinian rejection of meta-ethics is based upon claims about the nature of language, ethical language use, and our alleged inability to demarcate a clear domain of ethics for meta-ethics to investigate.

Wedgwood is right that ‘quietists’ refuse to engage with some questions or debates that animate the predominant culture of meta-ethical enquiry. But such questions are *rightfully* ignored, trivial, easily answered, or otherwise confused on relaxed realist views. So too with our Wittgensteinians: they are similarly countercultural in challenging one or more of the markers of the predominant meta-ethical culture. They do not simply fail to engage with what the predominant culture sees as crucial questions – rather, they provide some *rationale* for doing so that is inspired by some insight(s) of Wittgenstein’s. To insist that any of this is a failure to offer ‘substantive philosophical explanation[s]’ seems either uncharitable, or a product of failing to appreciate what these views amount to beyond their refusing to engage in questions that animate most meta-ethicists today.

Some helpfully disambiguate ways one might dismiss a question or debate to clarify forms of ‘quietism’ (Kremm & Schafer 2017: 644). But third, trying to understand the above views by appeal to such dismissals still motivates an unhelpful focus upon which of these forms of dismissal any allegedly quietist is suggesting. This is the wrong question to focus upon because

even if, say, two views agree that a question is based on a false presupposition, this is not a characterisation *of these views*. Rather, what the views are – their claims which *entail* or *suggest* that some question can be dismissed – and what is novel and interesting about them is obscured by characterising them by appeal to *what they reject* as opposed to *why* they do so.

To explain, Scanlon and Lovibond both suggest the question of ‘locating’ normative facts and properties ‘in the world’ is based on some false presupposition. But the reasons *why* they think this differ. We should thus see them as contributing two different challenges to contemporary meta-ethical debate and not just one because they reject the same question: Scanlon challenges us to defend a domain-independent picture of metaphysical enquiry, and Lovibond a picture of the relationship between language and reality where some apparently propositional claims can fail to be so. The same is true of anti-meta-ethical Wittgensteinians and views like Dworkin’s. Whilst they understand meta-ethics as requiring some moral neutrality, *the reasons why* they think moral neutrality is violated are not only different but, as I explained above, in conflict, giving us two different ways of doubting the possibility of meta-ethics. This obfuscation occurs even *within* the relaxed realist camp, as I’ve suggested with attention to the differences between Parfit’s, Scanlon’s, and Skorupski’s views.

The problem is that, in calling any such views forms of quietism – however we precisify that claim – we mask what is importantly novel and interesting about them by focussing upon what they reject as opposed to what they *accept*, which in turn explains *why* they reject certain other claims. And we invite attempts to understand these views that fudge the crucial differences between them and the subsequent challenges for meta-ethical orthodoxy that they provide. In doing so, we, fourth, confuse what the views being developed by these theorists *are* with *consequences* of these views – Scanlon’s moral realism, for example, is not the view that we can dismiss common metaphysical objections to non-naturalism as based on a false domain-independent view of metaphysics. Rather, the meta-metaphysical view he develops *entails* that such domain-independent views, and objections that presuppose them, are mistaken.³⁴

Finally, who seems to be failing to engage in the right questions depends upon what you think are the questions we *should* be engaging in. That is, who appears objectionably quiet

³⁴ This conflation may seem harmless. Oftentimes it may be. But when the views under discussion are ones that involve radical departures from how a debate or question is normally understood, the distinction between what a view is, and what it entails about how we normally understand a question, is crucial. Without it, we will struggle to understand the contributions they offer and the challenges to common assumptions they raise.

depends upon what you think you should be hearing. Take Dworkin's rejection of meta-ethics as morally neutral enquiry into the nature of morality. On Dworkin's view, anyone who tries to investigate, say, whether the property of wrongness exists, by doing anything other than asking if claims like 'torture is morally wrong' is true on ethical grounds, is being quiet about what is relevant to answering the question they wish to answer. The term, then, obscures how those who reject any radical re-conception of any meta-ethical debates are in some respect quietists from the perspective of those who are normally called 'quietists' in the first place. Given how 'where we are' in meta-philosophical space shapes what we think should be under discussion, we would do better to characterise the views we are interested in 'from within' those theories and not by appeal to what they reject.

So, what is 'meta-ethical quietism'? A loose assortment of views which variably challenge different assumptions that shape contemporary meta-ethical debate. We might precisify what we mean and, say, call such theorists 'new wave' non-naturalists to highlight their denial that non-naturalism requires positing non-natural entities in the world. But even this is uninformative and liable to – and *has* – generated confusion about the details of views such as Parfit's, Scanlon's, and Skorupski's. Perhaps some are properly called 'quietist' if they simply dismiss certain questions or debates and refuse to elaborate upon why. But if *that* is quietism, there are very few quietists. And, certainly, none to be found amongst those called meta-ethical quietists.³⁵

§4. Conclusion

What these views offer us are *prima facie* plausible, different ways of understanding investigation into the nature of morality and normativity more generally. If successful, they pull

³⁵ But can't taxonomical accuracy be traded off against having a taxonomy that facilitates effective discussion? For example, perhaps what I've said here suggests that we should say there is no such thing as moral naturalism because the core commitments of different theories within these camps differ, making it more difficult to talk about naturalist views in metaethics. First, I doubt my claims entail this, partly because I doubt the 'core commitments' of most (analytic or synthetic) moral naturalists differ in a way analogous to differences in meta-metaphysical commitments of many 'relaxed' realists, both amongst themselves and with most contemporary meta-ethicists. This is highlighted by seeing how the differences in core commitments amongst naturalists tend not to trouble our standard taxonomic practices whilst 'relaxed' realist views reject the often-implicit assumptions in the background of our theory-naming practices. To fail to see how they challenge such practices is partly to fail to see what is interestingly different about them. Second, whether a taxonomic choice allows us to helpfully discuss some collection of theories is partly an empirical matter. I believe that the recent history of discussion of 'meta-ethical quietism' reveals that grouping views like Parfit *et al.* as tokens of the same type of theory, whilst initially helpful, has generated confusion over what their theories amount to. The focus, instead, should be upon the background meta-philosophical commitments their views are based upon, noticing how these change the contours of meta-ethical debate, and understanding how we would then divide up theories we are familiar with 'from the perspective' of, say, Parfit's or Scanlon's theories. My thanks to Richard Rowland for pressing me here.

many enquiry-shaping assumptions typically made in meta-ethics today from under our feet. We thus ignore such heterodoxy at our own peril, and we fortify the meta-philosophical ground on which we stand if we work to face up to the challenges that they raise for us.

To end on a Wittgensteinian note: we often crave simple, unifying classifications of theories. But sometimes we should be guided not by the desire to find an apt label but to respect the complexity of what we find. Wittgensteinian work on the nature of morality and so-called relaxed realists are countercultural; that they share in common. But scratching the surface reveals differences which variably challenge the way many understand some or all meta-ethical debate or questions. We would do better, I've argued, not to engage with these as forms of 'meta-ethical quietism' but, instead, to focus on how they challenge those assumptions we reply upon when we classify different theories.

It is hard to reach across radically different cultures; across different ways of 'going on'. I suspect perceived distance generated by radically different meta-philosophical commitments (and, in some cases, philosophical style) has contributed to some of the work discussed here being pursued in isolation of much contemporary meta-ethical debate, or being engaged with in a way that has left those defending these novel views feeling misunderstood. But when we reach across successfully, we learn not only much about others but about ourselves too.³⁶

³⁶ I am extremely grateful to Jon Beale, Alex Bonham, Roger Crisp, Geoff Keeling, David Killoren, Richard Rowland, and Tim Williamson for very helpful written comments on or conversations regarding this paper or related topics. I am similarly grateful to the audience of the workshop for this volume at which I presented a version of this paper for their questions and comments. This paper was written whilst I was in receipt of funding from St Anne's College, Oxford, and the Aristotelian Society, for which I am eternally grateful.

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