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Archimedeanism and Why Metaethics Matters

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It may seem that, in a forum such as this, it is only preaching to the choir to argue for the thesis that metaethics both exists as a discourse in its own right and is important too. It is not unfair to say that philosophers are more prone to reflection than most, so it would not be surprising to find metaethicists engaged in self-justification as a matter of course. We are familiar with moral philosophers asking why anyone should care about morality, and we expect morality to be able to justify itself to our satisfaction. Something similar would be expected for metaethics. Why should anyone care about metaethics? But this essay is not a defense of metaethics in the name of idle self-justification, nor is the forum necessarily filled with choir members. For metaethics is under a sort of attack, and one of the attack's ironies is that it is being staged by those we would ordinarily think of as philosophers who have contributed significantly to metaethical discourse. In particular, putting cards on the table, leading the charge against metaethics, we have a self-proclaimed pragmatist and rejecter of all ontological claims, Richard Rorty, the progenitor of quasi-realism, Simon Blackburn, and the "face value" realist who wants to base the law on morality, Ronald Dworkin. While certainly not the only ones, these three, despite what appears to be massive metaethical disagreement amongst them, seem to all agree that metaethics is not an independent discourse, with a recognizable subject matter all of its own.[1]

[1] The irony should not escape us that Rorty, Blackburn, and Dworkin have had many significant, and often quite heated, disagreements about the foundations of ethics, or lack thereof, in the face of their agreement about the debilitated status of metaethics. Ultimately, it gives rise to Rorty's righteous insouciance, Blackburn's reluctant queasiness, and
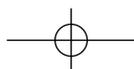
They would all agree with Rorty's idea that we cannot "step outside our skins",[2] and with Blackburn's thought that all questions *about* ethics are actually *within* ethics.[3] It is Dworkin, however, who has made the fulcrum of the current debate out of the idea that metaethics has no Archimedean leverage on ethics.[4] Blackburn and Dworkin both think that all metaethics is actually a part of standard normative ethics, and that one's so-called "metaethical" views are in fact not independent from the engaged, substantive ethical views which we take on matters such as abortion and slavery. Rorty at least acknowledges that academics are discussing something that is not wholly a part of normative ethics, but he thinks that this part in particular is a third spinning wheel that does nothing important whatsoever. The degree to which metaethics is distinct from normative ethics is the degree to which he thinks we should stop talking about metaethics; it is all a useless legacy of a misbegotten dialogue which Plato started long ago. We would be better off not doing it at all.[5] Metaethics is faced with two bad choices: either it does not exist or it does exist but does not matter.

Dworkin's frustrating quietism. For Rorty's insouciance, see Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xvi; for Blackburn's queasiness, see "Realism: Quasi or Queasy?" in J. Haldane and C. Wright (eds.), *Reality, Representation, and Projection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 365–83; for Dworkin as a quietist, see Nick Zangwill, Symposium commentator on R. Dworkin. *Brown Electronic Article Review Service*, ed. J. Dreier and D. Estlund, World Wide Web, http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/bears/9612zang.html, Dec. 2, 1996.

[2] Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xix. Rorty continues: "But we must be careful not to phrase this analogy [language as a tool] so as to suggest that one can separate the tool, Language, from its users and inquire as to its 'adequacy' to achieve our purposes. The latter suggestion presupposes that there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else." Later is his earliest use of "Archimedean" that I've found: "The modern Western 'culture critic' feels free to comment on anything at all … He is the person who tells you how all the ways of making things hang together hang together. But, since he does not tell you how all possible ways of making things hang together must hang together—since he has no extra-historical Archimedean point of this sort—he is doomed to become outdated" (p. xl).

[3] *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 295.

[4] "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25/2 (spring 1996), 87–139.

[5] Rorty writes: "The pragmatist takes the moral of this discouraging history [the failure to find a successful metaphysical account of either Truth or Goodness] to be that 'true sentences work because they correspond to the way things are' is no more illuminating than 'it is right because it fulfills the Moral Law.' Both remarks … are empty metaphysical compliments—harmless as rhetorical pats on the back to the successful inquirer or agent, but troublesome if taken seriously and 'clarified' philosophically" (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xvii). It is my sense, by the way, that from Rorty's point of view the final word of this quotation should have been capitalized to indicate his pejorative sense of "Philosophy".

Getting philosophical work out of a metaphor based on Archimedean leverage is not a new trick. It may have been Descartes who got things under way when he wrote in his Second Meditation:

Archimedes once demanded just one firm and immovable point, that he might move the whole earth. Great things are no less to be hoped for if I should find even one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.[6]

There are probably earlier philosophical applications of the metaphor of which I am not aware. The first contemporary use I have found of it is from a 1960 essay on language and knowledge by Isaiah Berlin; here, Berlin makes much the same use of the non-existence of an Archimedean point from which to evaluate our knowledge as Neurath had earlier made of the idea that knowledge, as a whole, is like a raft adrift.[7] It was Rawls, however, who first used the metaphor in a particularly moral way. Though not quite applying the idea in a metaethical context regarding the foundations of moral claims, in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls does discuss the idea of an Archimedean point by which particular moral judgments may be found justified.[8] His "Original Position" was intended to be just such a standpoint. He writes that: "justice as fairness is not at the mercy, so to speak, of existing wants and interests. It sets us an Archimedean point for assessing the social system without invoking a priori considerations" (p. 261). It is written about in this vein by David Gauthier and Bernard Williams as well.[9]

Of course, it is Dworkin's "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It" that has brought the metaphor into its current place in the form of a challenge to metaethics. Dworkin says that a theory is "Archimedean" if it

[6] *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. D. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 17.

[7] Berlin writes: "Most of the certainties on which our lives are founded […] the vast majority of the types of reasoning on which our beliefs rest, or by which we should seek to justify them […] are not reducible to formal deductive or inductive schemata, or a combination of them […] The web is too complex, the elements too many and not, to say the least, easily isolated and tested one by one […] we accept the total texture, compounded as it is out of literally countless strands […] without the possibility, even in principle, of any test for it in its totality. For the total texture is what we begin and end with. There is no Archimedean point outside it whence we can survey the whole and pronounce upon it […] the sense of the general texture of experience […] is itself not open to inductive or deductive reasoning: for both these methods rest upon it." Reprinted as "The Concept of Scientific History", in *Concepts and Categories*, ed. H. Hardy (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 114–15; ellipses added by J. Cherniss and H. Hardy in "Isaiah Berlin", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2007, World Wide Web at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berlin/.

[8] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[9] See, respectively, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), ch. 8, and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 2.

purports to "stand outside a whole body of belief, and to judge it as a whole from premises or attitudes that owe nothing to it" (p. 88). As a result, all explicitly metaethical theories are Archimedean in this sense. Dworkin, in a way to be sketched below, argues that all Archimedeanism leads to one form or another of skepticism, regardless of what the theorists may think about the commitments of their theories. This includes metaethical theories like error theories or relativistic theories, which are not too hard for Dworkin to interpret as "skeptical" of ethics and morality. It also includes, however, many metaethical positions which are prima facie not skeptical about morality in the least, including all the various forms of moral realism, secondary quality theories of value, subjectivism and expressivism of all stripes. According to Dworkin, all Archimedean metaethics leads to moral skepticism since it all ultimately leads to the conclusion that there are no right answers in ethics or morality. Some forms of Archimedeanism, such as error theories or cultural relativism, directly imply that there are no correct answers in morality. The rest will have to accept that there are no *right* answers to moral questions when they realize their various attempts to explicate the metaphysics and epistemology of "rightness", in this context, all fail, for one reason or another. Dworkin argues "against the case" of each Archimedean metaethical position, purportedly showing each to fail. (To this degree Dworkin and Rorty agree on the use of an "argument by cases" to conclude that we should give up on metaphysics.) Metaethics is the start of a road that invariably leads to skepticism, regardless of the intentions of the theorists, and this, were it true, would be a good reason to stop the discussion.

Dworkin's argument against Archimedeanism is based on an idea of neutrality, which for him is a technical term.[10] We can begin with a standard way of putting the standard distinction between so-called "first-order" and "second-order" moral propositions (what Dworkin calls "I" and "E" propositions).[11] On the one hand, we have engaged, substantive

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[10] Dworkin's also discusses "austerity" at length, which there is no room to discuss here as well. Neutrality is, however, a necessary ingredient in his argument against metaethics and if it fails, as I hope to show it does, then attending to austerity is superfluous.

[11] John Mackie expresses the Archimedean view in distinguishing between first and second order points of view: "Since it is with moral values that I am primarily concerned, the view I am adopting may be called moral scepticism. But this name is likely to be misunderstood: 'moral scepticism' might also be used as a name for either of two first order views, or perhaps for an incoherent mixture of the two. A moral sceptic might be the sort of person who says 'All this talk of morality is tripe,' who rejects morality and will take no notice of it. Such a person may be literally rejecting all moral judgements; he is likely to be making moral judgements of his own, expressing a positive moral condemnation of all that conventionally passes for morality; or he may be confusing

moral or ethical propositions, such as "Abortion is wrong" or "The life of pleasure is best," and on the other we have supposedly metaethical "further claims" or propositions about them, such as "What I said about abortion and pleasure was not just my venting my feelings." Archimedeans claim neutrality about the content of engaged moral claims since they claim to take "no sides" in engaged, substantive debates ("Objectivity and Truth", 93). Given this, Dworkin says that Archimedean neutrality is an "illusion" if two conditions apply (ibid. 97). The first is that for metaethical propositions, we can find "a plausible interpretation or translation of all of them that shows them to be positive moral judgments." The second condition obtains if we cannot demonstrate how metaethical claims are "philosophically distinct" from engaged propositions. It is "easy enough", Dworkin says, to see that the first condition obtains: "because the most natural reading of all [metaethically] further claims shows them to be nothing but clarifying or emphatic or metaphorical restatements or elaborations of [the engaged] proposition that abortion is wrong" (ibid.). Blackburn makes this same point, when he claims that affirming:

(1) Slavery is wrong.

(2) Slavery is objectively wrong.

(3) Slavery is truly, factually, really wrong.

all amount to the same thing. Rorty makes a similar point about propositions invoking "the Moral Law" (see n. 5 above). To use Blackburn's terminology, there is no semantic difference between affirming (1), (2), and (3), only a difference in "emotional temperature." Blackburn follows Ramsey, in thinking that like affirming "p", "it is a fact that p", and "it is true that 'p'" all mean the same, affirming (2), and (3) do not "mark an addition" to affirming (1): these affirmations all mean the same thing.[12] One may think one is distinguishing between a personal opinion and a claim about

these two logically incompatible views, and saying that he rejects all morality, while he is in fact rejecting only a particular morality that is current in the society in which he has grown up. But I am not at present concerned with the merits or faults of such a position. These are first order moral views, positive or negative; the person who adopts either of them is taking a certain practical, normative, stand. By contrast, what I am discussing is a second order view, a view about the status of moral values and the nature of moral valuing, about where and how they fit into the world. These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent: one could be a second order moral sceptic without being a first order one, or again the other way round" (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 16).

[12] *Ruling Passions*, 78. F. P. Ramesy, "Fact and Propositions", in *Foundations: Essays in Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics, and Economics*, ed. D. H. Mellor (London: Routledge, 1978), 40–57.

how the world actually is, while in effect all one is doing is making a further move in a normative debate by adding emphasis in the form of these "further claims". Blackburn, Dworkin, and Rorty agree that making further metaethical claims about one's engaged normative claims adds nothing to their content, though they may help a person gauge how strong one's moral commitments are. This is "metaethical minimalism".[13]

So, Dworkin thinks the first condition obtains that shows the illusory nature of Archimedean neutrality. Dworkin's argument that the second condition obtains is, as mentioned, an argument by cases. None of the going metaethical theories out there, according to Dworkin, succeeds in giving an adequate account of the metaphysics of ethics: he gives arguments that are supposed to show that realism fails, secondary quality theories fail, quasi-realism and expressivism fail, subjectivism fails, error theories fail, etc. Dworkin concludes that Archimedean neutrality is an illusion. Metaethical theorists are really taking part in engaged, substantive normative debate, whether they realize it or not. Moreover, they are all ultimately committed to moral skepticism, for reasons it is now time to explain.

Dworkin argues that some theories, like subjectivism, expressivism, and some forms of relativism, as well as error theories, are immediately skeptical about morality, since they are committed in one way or another to thinking there are no right answers to moral questions as there are to questions about, say, science. As a result, they are committed to claims such as:

(4) There is no right answer to the question of whether slavery is wicked.

Contrary to what these metaethicists may think, Dworkin argues that agreeing to (4) is agreeing to a substantial moral claim, a claim that "must be" evaluated as a claim "internal to the evaluative domain rather than archimedean about it" ("Objectivity and Truth", 89). He thinks uttering (4) implies adopting a position which condones slavery. The inference, which Dworkin never explicitly spells out, seems to be that from (4), we can derive:

(5) It is false to say that slavery is wicked.

And this seems to imply:

(6) Slavery is not wicked.

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[13] See e.g. Simon Blackburn, Symposium commentator on R. Dworkin. *Brown Electronic Article Review Service*, ed. J. Dreier and D. Estlund, World Wide Web, http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Philosophy/bears, as well as *Ruling Passions*, 77−9 and 294−7.

As such, the theories of these metaethicists commit them to immoral views, whether they realize it or not.[14] According to Dworkin, any metaethical theorist who claims that there are no right answers to moral questions is committed by the tenets of his or her theory to particular engaged, substantive moral views, particularly skeptical moral views, whether they realize it or not. Moral realism, secondary quality theories of value, or any attempted positive account of the nature of morality, will lead to skepticism since the failure of their various theories to give a coherent metaphysical account of the truth-makers for moral claims will lead them to accept (4), and (4) again leads to (6). So, all forms of Archimedeanism lead to skepticism.

One may begin to question these arguments by wondering whether or not this anti-Archimedeanism can be argued for without itself taking an Archimedean stand on the subject matter of metaethics: doesn't it require Archimedean leverage on reality to conclude that gaining Archimedean leverage on reality is impossible? Arguing against the possibility of metaphysics is itself to adopt a metaphysical position; one need only think of Hume. Rorty acknowledges how hard it is for a pragmatist to engage in debates with traditional Archimedean philosophers without getting pulled back into their debates. Rorty says, "Stop the debate" and as soon as we ask why, the very activity of his giving a response starts philosophy up again. Even if Rorty, qua pragmatist, says "Stop, because it doesn't work", we should still expect an Archimedean explanation for why it does not work and this he cannot consistently give. Blackburn ("Realism") is acutely aware of the problems of embracing a global form of quasi-realism, since it seems to leave us with no ontically firm categorical basis for our evaluative dispositions; it is, rather troublingly, dispositions "all the way down". A quasi-realist is committed to acknowledging a fact/value distinction, but then must go on to claim that this distinction is itself evaluative and not factual. We are left without a value independent world. The further problem for Blackburn comes from his arguing for quasi-realism against, say, realists and subjectivists, since it certainly seems like he is telling us that realism and subjectivism are false, not just internally from the quasi-realistic point of view, but in Archimedean fact. In order to conclude that affirming the claims (1), (2), and (3) above all come to the same thing, one must have already concluded that there is no robust objectivity, factuality, or substantial (non-minimalisitic) truth about morality. One wants to reply

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[14] Dworkin does not think these metaethicists themselves are immoral people who think that slavery is not wicked, but rather that they contradict themselves without knowing it. My thanks to Ronald Dworkin for discussion on this and other issues (see esp. n. 17 below).

to Blackburn by saying that when he says that all questions about ethics are actually within ethics (see n. 3 above), he is himself making a claim *about* ethics that fails to have any substantial, normatively loaded ethical implications for how we ought to live our lives.

The same problem can be extended to cover Dworkin's anti-Archimedeanism: in order to make his claims about the non-existence of an Archimedean standpoint that metaethics can occupy, he must either acknowledge that these are themselves metaethical claims, made from an Archimedean standpoint, or acknowledge that they are not really metaethical claims (the subject matter of which does not really exist anyway) but are really only a part of normatively engaged moral philosophy. If he adopts the former option, his claims are self-refuting. If he adopts the latter option, then he is taking part in a debate by denying the existence of the debate: his denial constitutes a performance error.[15] Dworkin cannot claim his anti-Archimedeanism is the truth about metaethical debate without denying his anti-Archimedean standpoint: in order to privilege the claim that there is no Archimedean standpoint over the claim that there is an Archimedean standpoint, one must adopt an Archimedean standpoint.

At this point, the rhetoric begins to spiral out of control and the dialectic becomes close to pointless. There are other ways, however, to defend metaethics. One is to look more closely at the sort of argument given above, beginning with (4). (4) is in fact an unusually constructed proposition and this is revealed by considering its negation. Normally, we do not think that the addition or removal of a negation can turn a normative proposition into a non-normative one, or vice versa.[16] One may negate (4) by placing the

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[15] A similar point is made by Kenneth Ehrenberg, "Archimedean Metaethics Defended" *Metaphilosophy* 39/4–5 (2008), 508–29.

[16] See e.g. James Brown's, "Moral Theory and the Ought-Can Principle" *Mind* 86 (1977), 206–23; George Mavrodes', " 'Is' and 'Ought' " *Analysis* 25/2 (1964), 42–4; and D. G. Collingridge's, " 'Ought-Implies-Can' and Hume's Rule" *Philosophy* 52 (1977), 348–51. These philosophers assume the negation of a normative judgment is itself a normative judgment in their attempts to show a contradiction between Kant's dictum that "ought implies can" and Hume's dictum that "is does not imply ought". I take these issues up in more detail in my "Two Dogmas of Metaethics" *Philosophical Studies* 132 (2007), 439–66. In "Metaethics and Normative Commitment" *Philosophical Issues* 12 (2002), 241–63, James Dreier says the assumption is "safe" but points out that Humberstone's taxonomy does not support it. See I. L. Humberstone, "First Steps in a Philosophical Taxonomy" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 12 (1982), 467–78 and "A Study in Philosophical Taxonomy" *Philosophical Studies* 83 (1996), 121–69.

In Madison, Peter Vranas pointed out that there are some trivial logical moves involving disjunctions of moral with non-moral propositions, similar to moves made by Arthur Prior to bridge Hume's "is/ought gap", which show that the above claim about negation and normativity admits of counterexamples. While technically both Vranas and

negation in different spots, and the meaning of the resulting proposition may vary according to where and how the negation is used. One natural reading of (4) when negated involves a double negation, which when eliminated leaves it reading:

(7) There is a right answer to the question whether slavery is wicked.

("It is false that there is no right answer" = "There is a right answer".) One might think that since (7) seems to be consistent with thinking that slavery is wicked as well as with thinking that it is not, its "Archimedean neutrality" is preserved, and that should make us reconsider the status of (4). But there are contexts in which (7) seems to be engaged: suppose that a recalcitrant bigot maintains (4), that there is no determinate answer to the question whether slavery is wicked, because the moral considerations that tell in favor of classifying it as wicked are exactly evenly balanced with the moral considerations that militate against such a classification. In response, (7) might be uttered by someone who disagreed about the balance of considerations, thinking either that slavery is wicked or that it is not wicked, or (7) may also be uttered by someone who, perhaps due to the determinate nature of the utilitarian calculus, thinks there are no genuine moral dilemmas, there are always right answers, even if we cannot always figure out what "the right answer" is. There are undeniably engaged contexts in which (4) and (7) figure.[17]

The problem for Dworkin's account of neutrality is that there are ambiguities in these propositions, and the appearances do not lie: there are other non-engaged, metaethical, contexts in which (4) and (7) may be uttered where their Archimedean neutrality is preserved. As examples (to be discussed in the following paragraphs), they might also be uttered in the context of an argument between a moral realist and a cultural relativist; or in a different argumentative context, (4) can be read as entailing a contradiction while (7) can be seen as an empty tautology. There are a variety of meanings of these propositions which come through when considering different contexts in which they could be asserted.

On the natural reading of (7) mentioned above, it is consistent with both the idea that slavery is not wicked (which was (6)), and that it is wicked. On this reading of (7), it does not imply (6) or its negation, since these give determinate answers to the pertinent question, whereas (7) only asserts that such answers exist without saying anything about what they are. Whatever the truth is with regard to slavery's wickedness, one can take any substantive position with regard to it, say either (6) or its negation, and still accept (7). In this context, (7) might be agreed upon by all parties to an engaged debate over whether or not slavery is wicked. So, in a context such as this, it looks like (7) cannot be a substantive ethical claim; (7) is normatively neutral. On this reading, (7) is a metaethical claim that retains Archimedean neutrality. Such a claim is contested ground in a debate between, say, the realist and relativist (or a realist and an error theorist). The former asserts (7) and the latter denies it. In this context, however, uttering (7) is not to take a stand on whether or not slavery is wicked.

In still another context (7) can be read as a tautology.[18] If the inference from (4) to (6) is a good one, then the following would have to be good as well:

(4) There is no right answer to the question of whether slavery is wicked.

(5′) It is false to say that slavery is not wicked.

(6′) Slavery is wicked.

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call (6′) "Slavery is wicked", and hence (4) rules out any moral view saying that slavery is wicked, but (4) still does not entail (6). (4) will also entail (5′), which is inconsistent with (6), and hence rules out the view saying that slavery is not wicked, while not entailing (6′). So (4) is consistent, despite ruling out both (6) and (6′). Since that is so, it follows from Harman's interpretation that (7), which is the negation of (4), is a substantive normative claim. I thank Mark Schroeder for his help in reconstructing Harman's thought.

[18] I again thank Mark Schroeder, this time for pointing out this reading of (7).

Recall that (6) was that "Slavery is not wicked". So, if there are good arguments from (4) to both (6) and (6′), then these latter together yield:

(6&) Slavery is wicked and slavery is not wicked.

And this is obviously a contradiction. But if (4) entails a contradiction, and (7) is a negation of (4), then (7) is a tautology, which again makes it substantially neutral. Someone might assert (7) in this way if they wanted to sum up a thought like the following:

Look, at the normative level, either the abolitionist or the slave-trader is right or there's a draw between them (in which case 'the right answer' is that there is no right answer); so, no matter what there is a right answer at the normative level; or, at the metaethical level, either the realist is right or the relativist is, or error theorist or expressivist is right, but somebody has got to be right, and so too at that level, of course, there is always going to be a right answer. So, no matter what, there is always going to be a right answer (even if, again, 'the right answer' is that there is no right answer). (7) is an empty tautology and implies nothing substantially.

What we may conclude is that there is no reason to draw any specific conclusions about the meaning of (7) or how it is best interpreted or "translated", since its meaning and/or best interpretation will vary from one context of utterance to another. There is, as Dworkin suggests, a sense in which (4) is odious and implies (6), but if (4) were ever actually uttered, it need not be meant in this way; it could be, but, as we have seen, it certainly need not be. (4) may imply (6), but it certainly does not entail it. The Archimedean neutrality of both (4) and (7) may be preserved, given that they may be uttered as contested metaethical propositions which happen to focus, as an example, on the debate over the status of slavery.

What we learn is that the first condition of Dworkin's account of neutrality is far too weak to do its job. Recall, this first condition is that, for each purported metaethical proposition, we can find "a plausible interpretation or translation of all of them that shows them to be positive moral judgments" ("Objectivity and Truth", 97). Simply considering sentences in isolation and finding a way to interpret them as part of an engaged debate is not sufficient for showing a lack of neutrality. While there may be some utterances of (4) and (7) that make them fit to be interpreted as positive and engaged moral judgments, what we have seen is that there are other contexts in which such an interpretation is not plausible.

So there is reason to think that Dworkin is wrong to hold that the first condition obtains: not all metaethical claims can be "plausibly interpreted" as a part of engaged morality. And Dworkin's argument by cases in support of the second condition is not satisfying either. For example, one

need not be sympathetic at all with naturalistic moral realism to think Dworkin's saddling them with so-called "morons" or "moral fields" will philosophically settle the matter; an argument like that may satisfy a jury of philosophical lay people, but not one of people trained in philosophy. As another example, James Dreier has done an excellent job in articulating a neutral form of secondary quality theory that turns on a sophisticated three-dimensional semantic model.[19] Nor will Dworkin's quietism about his own metaphysical commitments be satisfying on its own terms: after all his criticism of others, his own reticence sounds like a cop-out. In any case, showing how weak all the available *explanans* are does not suffice to show that there is no *explanandum* "out there" to be explained. (For another comment on Dworkin's second condition, see n. 20.)

In any case, there are reasons, contra Dworkin, to think that an account of Archimedean neutrality should not hang on what interpretations or translations of a person's language are possible, as much as it should hang on what a person's commitments actually are. (Dreier (n. 19) argues for this point as well.) What we really want to know is if being committed to one metaethical theory over another ipso facto commits one to some particular substantial moral position and/or vice versa. We can establish a more plausible understanding of the "neutrality" of a metaethical claim from the claims of a substantive normative debate by establishing two conditions (*a*) and (*b*). We may say that a metaethical claim X is neutral with respect to substantial debate over an engaged thesis Y, just if (*a*) one can consistently hold that X is true while also holding either the truth or the falsity of Y and (*b*) that one can consistently hold that X is false while holding either the truth or the falsity of Y.[20] So, consider (8) as X:

(8) The ontology of the actual world lacks mind-independent moral properties.

and (9) as Y:

(9) Abortion is immoral.

(*a*) obtains because one can consistently assert (8) by denying the existence of mind-independent moral properties while also thinking either (9) is true

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[19] "Metaethics and Normative Commitment" *Philosophical Issues* 12 (2002), 241–63.
[20] It is worth noting that if this account of neutrality is both cogent and has application, then, by itself, it vitiates Dworkin's second condition for the illusory nature of Archimedean neutrality, even before his "argument by cases" can begin. This condition obtains if we cannot demonstrate how metaethical claims are "philosophically distinct" from engaged propositions. But if one can hold a metaethical position X, while adopting either the truth or falsity of engaged position Y, and vice versa as laid out above, then it is hard to see what more could be needed for being "philosophically distinct". I thank Jeffrey Wisdom for pointing this out to me.

and that abortion is immoral, or that it is not immoral, taking (9) to be false. Condition (*b*) obtains as well: one can consistently deny (8) and assert that (9) is either true or false. Whatever the truth is with regard to immorality of abortion, one can take any position in the metaethical debate over the existence of mind-independent moral properties. Therefore, the substantive ethical debate over the morality of abortion is neutral with respect to the debate over the existence of mind-independent moral properties.

To borrow a page from Rawls, we can imagine a "normative veil of ignorance" that blocks people from knowing all their engaged ethical positions. We could then go on to ask whether people behind the veil could pursue metaethical debate. For example, take George, Osama, and Friedrich and put them behind this sort of normative veil of ignorance. We can easily imagine George and Osama agreeing on the idea that moral truth (whatever it may be) comes from God and arguing with Friedrich who is both an atheist and a skeptic about morality; and this is consistent with these characters agreeing or disagreeing in any combination on engaged normative issues when not behind the veil. Indeed, we can imagine a different scenario where we have Richard, Simon, and Ronald all being fairly liberal and tolerant in their engaged moral and political views and yet, behind such a veil, they might find plenty to argue about, such as whether insouciance is really an apt attitude to take toward morality, whether it makes sense to see all facts as being at least partly constituted by our values, or whether or not law ought to take morality as its foundation.

Moreover, metaethicists need not see neutrality as a black and white issue. Of course, we should expect there to be some sort of logical relations that obtain between some moral and metaethical views. And there might even be some metaethical positions that rule out or rule in some engaged points of view. It might be possible for some to make direct inferences from their metaethical views to engaged views: if one were a moral nihilist, one might take the non-existence of morality as license to act in ways conventionally deemed "immoral". We could also, however, imagine a nihilist who is as committed to being morally good as a master chess player is to being a good chess player; it might just all be a game to a nihilist, but it might also be a game the nihilist cares about deeply.

It is important to note that metaethicists need not claim that metaethical theorizing is completely value neutral. No one wants to dispute the value-ladenness of all theoretical dispute: at bottom, all theories are chosen for their simplicity, elegance, and explanatory power, among other considerations, all of which are epistemic values. (The metaphysical realist argues that simplicity, elegance, and explanatory power are, in some robust way, truth conducive.) What metaethicists of all stripes want to insist upon, however, is that the nature of morality can be truly described: among the variety

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of extant metaethical positions (or perhaps one not yet conceived), one of these is correct or true, and the others are incorrect or false, in the same way that most physicists assume that one interpretation of quantum physics is true and the others are false, even if they are not in a position to say which is which. All metaethicists need to claim is that morality is a phenomenon in the world whose nature is best described by one metaethical theory over the others: for example, either expressivism or constructivism or moral realism or error theory or cultural relativism is the truth about morality. Perhaps again the truth is some position no one has thought of yet. None of this implies that metaethical theories lack normative import or are wholly value free. Metaethical theorizing must obey the same normative canons of logic and theoretical reasoning as any other sort of theorizing: at the very least, it must meet normal epistemic standards.

It is worth noting that there is value-laden normativity running through most philosophical pursuits and at some level, all discourses are entwined with each other, none seem wholly independent from all others. (This is certainly true of any sort of Quineian "web of beliefs".) In the end, there may be no sharp line to be drawn between engaged ethics and metaethics; all distinctions between discourses may be to some degree vague. Nevertheless, a vague distinction is still a distinction, just as day is distinct from night, though twilight be vague, and acorns are not oak trees, despite the lack of a sharp line distinguishing them.

Engaged ethics and metaethics share conceptual underpinnings, for example, both take the same concept, namely that of *ethics* (or perhaps *morality*) as their starting point, if we are arguing from first principles, and as their goal, if we are arguing toward first principles. But ethics is intended to be practical while metaethics is theoretical. And one might say that since we have shown the neutrality of metaethics and that its import is theoretical, have we not, thereby, shown metaethics to be unimportant? Is it not a third wheel, spinning along, affecting nothing? Spurious? Otiose?

Nicolas Sturgeon once wrote a paper called "What Difference Does it Make Whether Moral Realism is True?", arguing against what he called the "So What Thesis" which is itself a common response to the claims of moral realism.[21] We can globalize the question of his title, at least with respect to metaethics, and ask of any particular metaethical theory, what difference it makes if it is true. Why should anyone care which metaethical theory is true? Isn't it enough that we just go on being engaged, to the

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[21] *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 suppl. (1986), 115–41.

best of our ability, in our practical, ethical lives? And, again, haven't we just seen how the answers to metaethical questions do not determine the outcome of engaged normative debates, like that of slavery, abortion, or capital punishment? Arguing for the neutrality of metaethics seems to be arguing it into irrelevance.

This appearance is, however, deceptive. There are, of course, ways in which theory does affect practice. Examples outside metaethics are rife. The debate over scientific realism is one. Consider an analogy of (8) and (9), where in place of (8), we have a statement of Bas van Fraassen's constructive empiricism.[22] We then get:

(10) Science takes empirical adequacy (not truth) as its goal and to accept a theory is to accept it as empirically adequate.

Imagine (11) as the statement of a position, taken from a journal in applied physics, in a recherché debate regarding the behavior of quarks. (10) would be as neutral to (11), as (8) is to (9). It is hard to imagine that the outcome of the debate about quarks would be settled by the debate between a scientific realist and a constructive empiricist, especially since both theories about science can adequately explain all the empirical data. Yet, no one accuses Bas van Fraassen of surreptitiously engaging in substantial scientific debates in the way that metaethicists are accused of being engaged. Nor does anyone think that there is nothing important at stake in this debate in the philosophy of science. To foreshadow the discussion below, consider the differences between how a constructive empiricist and a realist conceive of disagreement in science. On the constructivist's view, there is no problem in adopting two mutually inconsistent theories since inconsistent theories can both be empirically adequate; one may use whichever theory is most convenient. Realism, on the other hand, is not so permissive, since it is assumed by all that the truth, whatever it may be, cannot contradict itself. Permissiveness, in this regard, may affect the argumentative standards at play in a disagreement about quarks, and this is the sort of difference theory can make to practice: it can open up or close off areas of discussion, it can affect what counts as evidence or as a "relevant consideration" in the debate. Theory will not settle the debate, but it may constrain it. This can help us see how metaethics can be relevant to normative ethics while maintaining its Archimedean neutrality.

A defender of metaethics may begin a more direct articulation of how the truth about it matters by noting the ubiquity of normativity and

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[22] *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). I thank Tom Bontly for very helpful discussion of the analogy to this debate in the philosophy of science.

why we think it matters. It is nowadays a commonplace to note that both epistemology and semantics have normative aspects to them.[23] One might think that understanding the phenomenon of normativity could, indeed, affect how we conceive of the practical endeavors of knowing and communicating. There are ways we ought to behave, ways we ought to think, and ways we ought to speak, and understanding what is meant by these various "ought"-s might teach us something useful about ourselves, what sort of creatures we are, what sort of world we live in. The already mentioned value-ladenness of theorizing in general secures the usefulness of understanding the nature of value and the proper bearing of it on our lives, however indirect this usefulness might be. We should be surprised to find the truths of epistemology determining which statistical analysis to use in garnering the truth from some set of data, just as we would be surprised to find the truth about universal grammar settling a particular dispute about the meaning of a slang expression. Perhaps some extreme or out-lying counterexamples to these ideas might be found in bizarre or exceptional circumstances, but no general truths follow from this about epistemology or philosophy of language, their autonomy or their importance. Metaethics is in the same boat.

Still, this is only to gesture at the way in which metaethicists may respond to the Global So What Thesis. What metaethics can teach us is how much of ethics is "up to us", to be decided by personal choice or social convention, and how much is not "up to us". Metaethics will tell us how much of ethics is detected and how much is invented, and this could affect our engaged practices in at least four different ways, which may not be more than little mentioned here. The four ways are that metaethics will (i) explain the authority morality actually has over us, as well as the nature and extent of that authority; (ii) determine what the proper moral epistemology is; (iii) affect how we manage the moral education of the young; and, finally, and perhaps most importantly, (iv) affect how we conceive of and handle engaged moral disagreement. Though settling these matters will not, by itself, be sufficient to determine the outcome of engaged debates over issues such as abortion or capital punishment, it would be invalid to conclude from this that metaethics is useless and this is the minimum required to rebut the Global So What Thesis.

There are many metaethical theories. Roughly grouping them, while leaving some hybrids out for the sake of simplicity, we might say that there are four groups: realist theories, expressivist theories, constructivist

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[23] For a well-developed account of the close relations between moral and epistemic normativity, see Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

theories, and error theories. Equally roughly, we may say that realists hold moral truth to be determined by mind-independent reality; expressivists think that the nature of morality is exhausted by the expression of (non-cognitive or quasi-cognitive) attitude; constructivists hold that moral facts are constructed by personal or social choice (and hence include cultural relativists); and error theorists who think that our pre-philosophical concept of *morality* implies the existence of entities that do not in fact exist. Given these four types of theories, not to mention the many, many distinctions available within each type, and the four ways mentioned above that metaethics can matter, there is no present room for discussing each of the sixteen resultant combinations. Even if it turned out that each group did not dictate a distinct answer for each of the four ways, the remainder would still require a lot to thoroughly discuss. We must settle for sketches.

What is the nature of moral constraint, or of the demands of morality, and the extent of these demands? What is the origin of moral authority? Why ought I (or we) be moral? First, perhaps, is the question of whether figuring out the nature of moral authority is relevant or irrelevant to actual engaged morality. It seems hard to resist answering "Relevant", since we typically think there is a difference between the authority of morality and the authority of prudence; we think the authority behind proper table manners is different from the authority of conscience. At the very least, there will be differences in motivation and psychology regarding moral decision making. To deny this would be like thinking that there is no difference between doing something of one's own free will and being coerced into doing it. To put these differences of authority in terms of value, we can all think of some cheap-quality snapshot that has great "sentimental value" to us, and it is obvious that sentimental value does not have the same authority over us as moral value. Even if one did answer by saying "The nature of moral authority is irrelevant to engaged morality", an apt response would be to point out that ruling out as irrelevant whole ranges of considerations from a deliberative process is certainly pragmatically relevant to that process. Undeniably, ruling out astrology and superstition from scientific consideration has had pragmatic effects on scientific practice. Realists, expressivists, constructivists, and error theorists will all answer these questions about the nature of moral authority differently. Who is right among them will therefore make a difference to engaged morality, though it is hard to see how the answer could count one way or another in a debate about what to do in a particular situation. Take, for example, the impermissibility of slavery. Each metaethical theory had better be consistent with the impermissibility of slavery, or it is not even in the running. In a case where we are not quite as confident as we are about slavery, when claiming, for example, that capital punishment is never permissible under

any circumstances, it is nevertheless hard to see how taking a position in the metaethical debate entails one outcome or another at the engaged level. It is one thing to agree on what ought to be done, it is another to agree on how important or authoritative this prescription is.

Moving on, it is not hard to see how knowing which moral epistemology is true for us, knowing how we gain moral knowledge, can have an effect on our engaged moral practices. It is hard to see how to deny it. The differences between being an intuitionist, a rationalist, or an empiricist with regards to moral knowledge should be apparent, and agreeing on these matters will make an engaged argument go differently. What counts as evidence will certainly be affected. For example, intuitionism seems necessary for being any sort of non-naturalist about morality. If, say, one believed in God as the source of all morality, and that we have knowledge of what is moral and immoral, one probably would think we gain moral knowledge through intuition (or perhaps revelation plus testimony). And this lets in and rules out all sorts of different considerations. If one is rationalist, then one is likely to think that moral knowledge is a priori, and if it is, this can give us certainty, or perfect confidence in moral claims. One might think that even God could not deceive us into thinking that $2 + 2 = 5$, and the knowledge of the wrongness of torturing babies for fun could be equally certain. We would likely lack just that sort of confidence if we were naturalists who think that moral knowledge is a posteriori, but we can of course have almost certain confidence in our knowledge of, say, evolutionary theory, and our confidence in morality may be of the same ilk. Constructivists will say that the moral properties are importantly different than biological or chemical properties, and the way we gain knowledge of morality is correspondingly different than how we gain knowledge of biology or chemistry. Moral epistemology must be sensitive to such distinctions. Expressivists must shoulder the burden of explaining how we can have moral knowledge, despite the fact that it is not fully cognitive as knowledge of chemistry is. And if error theorists are right, and there is literally no such thing as moral knowledge, it will be their challenge (if they choose to accept it) to show how this result can or should make no practical difference, such that we can be error theorists and go on just as we had been going on without being unjustified in our behavior.

At this point, it should be obvious how the answers to metaethical questions might influence moral education, which is of undeniably pragmatic value. If, for example, a Stevensonian emotivism is correct, then teaching our children to think morally will require different pedagogical strategies and tactics than if, say, the Cornell realists are right and moral knowledge is empirical and a posteriori. If moral argumentation has as its point the suasion of attitude, then we should teach our children differently than if

moral argumentation is no different than rational argumentation about a mathematical proof or a scientific theory. If we are error theorists and we still want our children to behave in ways that are conventionally called "moral," then we will have to consider how to train them, given the knowledge that down the road, they will learn that morality has much in common with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy.

But perhaps the "knock-down" argument for the import of metaethics comes from looking at moral disagreement. There are, of course, many different kinds of disagreement among humans. Indeed, we can probably disagree over just about anything. Typically, in disagreements, there are what might be called "ground rules" or "rules of engagement" in the disagreement that determine which sorts of considerations are relevant and which are irrelevant. Disagreements, when conducted fairly, proceed based on these ground rules, though it could hardly be maintained that, in general, determining the ground rules determines the outcomes of the disagreement. Different kinds of disagreements have different ground rules. So, from the engaged point of view, disagreements are handled differently in morality, etiquette, baseball, science, and math, while there is, of course, non disputandum for mere gustibus. In general, we think it matters to how a dispute is to be engaged whether, in the end, we think it will be decided by a determination of the truth or by an exercise of power. And even if the latter is the case, we may nevertheless think it apt to "speak truth to power". If it turns out that cultural relativists are right about morality, then this should affect how we handle some, if not all, cross-cultural moral disputes; at the very least, relativism weighs in favor of tolerance, though of course relativists have no exclusive rights to tolerance. If morality is conventional in its foundations, precedence and tradition will probably deserve more weight in deliberation than if morality is founded upon rationality. If non-naturalistic realism carries the metaethical day, then the value of empirical data or arguments that are a posteriori in character will have a different significance in moral disagreement than if naturalistic realism turns out to be true. As noted above, if Stevensonian emotivism is correct, then moral disagreements, when not based on fact, will be settled by non-cognitive forms of suasion. If an error theory turns out to be the truth, such that no moral claims can reasonably be thought of as "literally true", then this should, at some level, affect how we argue, if our argument is currently predicated on the idea that we are, indeed, arguing over what is true. When considering how we ought to handle engaged moral disagreement, determining what the true ontology is for morality, whatever it may be, may make a clear practical difference: not everything is equally worth dying or killing for.

One might think that, by responding to the Global So What Thesis, have we then fallen back toward the idea that there is no such thing as

Archimedean neutrality?[24] Any answer that might be given might seem to play right into the hands of Rorty, Blackburn, and Dworkin. This appearance, however, can be easily dispelled by noting that it is wrong to let one party to a dispute settle the rules by which the dispute is to be settled. It would be question-begging in all sorts of ways to let, for example, a deontologist or a consequentialist be the arbiter of the "ground rules" for a dispute between them. This would be like letting one team in a competition determine what the rules of the game are. Archimedean neutrality is required of metaethics, at the very least, because it is the metaethicists who are charged with determining the ground rules of engaged morality or the rules of the moral game. Anything less than neutrality at the metaethical level may very well have question-begging and unfair consequences at the engaged level. Just as we should fix the laws of the land and the procedures for how cases are to be tried prior to trying the first case, so too is there a priority for figuring out what we think about metaethics before we try to answer engaged questions about how one ought to live.

Metaethics matters because the truth about it should affect, should constrain the form of engaged ethics and morality. It may have a direct effect on the content or substance of morality, in the way that it is possible for syntax to have an effect on what counts as semantically meaningful. And just as one may nevertheless find syntax to be independent of semantics, and vice versa, one may also find metaethics to be independent of engaged ethics. This analogy may not be perfect. Neither, however, is the metaphor of metaethics as Archimedean. Metaethics does not give us enough leverage on engaged moral debate to settle its outcomes. Still, answering metaethical questions can help determine the way engaged ethical debates are pursued, and this may in turn, indirectly, help settle them, if only by setting argumentative constraints, ruling-out and/or ruling-in types of consideration, and determining what counts as evidence. Therefore, metaethics is substantially independent of engaged ethics, and yet it matters nonetheless.

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[24] I thank both Daniel Massey and Douglas Edwards for independently bringing this worry to my attention.