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Rorty's Promise in Metaethics

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Abstract

Little attention is given to Richard Rorty's metaethical views. No doubt this stems from the fact that most commentators are more interested in his metaphilosophical views; most see his metaethical views, offered in scattered passages, as just the downstream runoff from higher-level reflection. This article considers Rorty's metaethics on their own merits, quite apart from whether his global picture works. I ultimately argue that Rorty's metaethical outlook is attractive but beset by internal difficulties. Specifically, I contend that Rorty does not and cannot remain faithful to the methodological approach to metaethics for which he advocates. At the paper's close, I gesture at a nearby methodological approach that best approximates Rorty's metaethical methodology.

Keywords

metaethical methodology – metaethics – metaphilosophy – philosophical methodology – Richard Rorty

Too little attention is paid to Richard Rorty's metaethical views, besides the passing (and unclear) claim that he was some type of moral relativist. This inattention probably stems from the fact that Rorty's metaethical musings are scattered across his oeuvre; there is no go-to place for reading and

engaging with Rorty's metaethical outlook. To see his outlook requires one to sift through many passages in different articles and books, extrapolating and re-wording as needed. The effort is handsomely repaid, however, for what results is an interesting and plausible metaethical outlook. The primary task of this paper to shed light on Rorty's metaethical outlook. The second task is to offer a suggestion about how the outlook might be improved.

The layout of the paper is as follows. In Section 1, I outline the two parts of Rorty's metaethical outlook, his substantive metaethics and his metaethical methodology. Then, in Section 2, I show that Rorty betrays his methodology, such that he has a 'mixed' view like Putnam and Scanlon. I call it *mixed* because it is Rortyan in one respect but not Rortyan in another. Next, in Section 3, I explain that Rorty had to betray his official methodology because there is no logical alternative. Finally, Section 4 contains a brief sketch of an argument that better approximates Rorty's official methodology.

1 Rorty's Metaethical Outlook

Metaethics, as most philosophers understand the field today, refers to a particular set of issues surrounding moral semantics, moral epistemology, and the metaphysics of morality. As such, three major questions dominate the field: the cognitivism question, the skepticism question, and the ontological question. I gloss these three questions as follows:

The cognitivism question: Is moral discourse truth-apt?

The skepticism question: Do we have moral knowledge?

The ontological question: Are there normative properties?

Many sophisticated metaethical positions can be summarized by their answers to this set of questions. Moral realists say "Yes, yes, yes" to the three questions. Moral constructivists also say "Yes, yes, yes." (It is no accident that this view looks, in summary, indistinguishable from moral realism.) Moral error theorists say "Yes, no, no," while moral expressivists say "No, no, no." These three questions and the various views that can be crafted by combining answers to them – all of this is what I call *substantive metaethics*.

There is another side to metaethics, what I call *metaethical methodology*. Metaethical methodology asks how we should settle on answers in substantive metaethics. More precisely, metaethical methodology is the domain of inquiry wherein one decides which considerations are relevant for answering our questions in substantive metaethics. For the sake of clarity, we

should have an example of a debate in metaethical methodology. With his 2011 book,¹ David Enoch spawned a debate about whether deliberative indispensability² counts as good grounds for taking up a particular metanormative view.³ Were this debate solely about metaethics and not about metanormativity more generally, it would serve as a perfect example of a conversation in metaethical methodology. Still, it should be illustrative. This kind of methodological inquiry receives less fanfare than the questions from substantive metaethics, but it is no less important. This is especially so when it comes to deciphering Rorty's views.

Substantive metaethics and metaethical methodology are the two components of what I call one's *metaethical outlook*. Rorty's metaethical outlook – at least on the official story – is interesting and well-constructed. As I explain in more detail below, Rorty's substantive metaethics is an increasingly common view, but his metaethical methodology is unique and uniquely well-suited for his substantive metaethics.

Rorty's substantive metaethics is an instance of what one might call *metaethical minimalism*. Perhaps the best way to delineate this view is to see how it answers the aforementioned big questions in substantive metaethics. Recall that these were the cognitivism question, the skepticism question, and the ontological question. The minimalist answers these questions with a yes to the first, a yes to the second, and hemming and hawing about the third. In like fashion, Rorty can assent to the idea that moral discourse is truth-apt, so long as we understand that claiming that a proposition is true is not to say anything about correspondence, or "getting reality right."⁴ Saying that a moral statement, or any statement, is true is just to express "commendation,"⁵ Rorty says. On the skepticism question, Rorty can agree

¹ David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Deliberative indispensability is the notion that commitment to some proposition is indispensable for engaging in deliberation.

³ For just a sampling of this lively debate, see Alex Worsnip, "Explanatory Indispensability and Deliberative Indispensability: Against Enoch's Analogy," *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* (2016), accessed November 26, 2016, doi:10.1002/tht3.220.

⁴ Richard Rorty, "Introduction," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁵ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23.

that we have moral knowledge. Since “there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is,”⁶ there seems to be no good reason to deny that we have moral knowledge. Nobody seriously denies that we have some knowledge of the natural world; therefore, we have knowledge about moral matters too. On the ontological question, whether there are normative properties, Rorty’s response becomes more complicated. He wants to say that there seems to be no good reason to talk that way, especially if one has metaphysically inflationary designs. Moral discourse works just fine without recourse to normative properties. However, taking this stance is not to agree with someone like J.L. Mackie who argued against the existence of normative properties.⁷ As Rorty says, pragmatists “do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that ‘there is no such thing’ as... Goodness.”⁸

While the primary aim is to delineate, not to defend, Rorty’s metaethics, it is worth pausing to note what is attractive about his substantive metaethics. The minimalist view has the benefit of letting us say commonsensical things about morality. For instance, we can say torturing animals for sport is morally wrong, we can further say it is *true* that such torture is wrong, and we can finally say that we *know* that this is wrong. This benefit is shared by other views, most importantly, moral realism. The added benefit of minimalism is that the minimalist is not saddled with an implausible metaphysics that seems to defy commonsense. The minimalist just avoids talk of normative properties, which, of course, is the lynchpin of moral realism. This is all to say that minimalism has all the attractions of moral realism without its major shortcoming.

Let us move on from this minor digression to examining the other component of Rorty’s metaethical outlook, the methodology. On the official story, Rorty’s metaethical methodology demands that we answer our substantive metaethical questions in a way that does “not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology.”⁹ What does this mean? This phrase is shorthand for the idea that inquiry about whether *p* shall not be settled by investigating the referents and properties named in the sentence “*p*.”

⁶ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism,” *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. 163.

⁷ J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), pp. 36–42.

⁸ Richard Rorty, “Introduction,” *Consequences of Pragmatism* [hereinafter CP] (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. xiv.

⁹ Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity,” p. 22.

Another way to put the idea: we shall not conduct inquiry about whether *p* as if there were some realm of facts to which we can point. This claim about method should sound reminiscent of Rorty's substantive metaethics. There, the thought was that we can settle ethical questions without recourse to normative properties, to correspondence-talk, to truth-makers. One does not argue that the 'property of moral wrongness' is instantiated in such-and-so action, according to Rorty's minimalism. The argument purporting that such-and-so action is wrong must be practical, not metaphysical. As Rorty puts it, "The pragmatists' justification of toleration, free inquiry, and the quest for undistorted communication can only take the form of a comparison between societies... by reference to various detailed *practical* advantages."¹⁰ This type of stance is the heart of philosophical pragmatism, for it insists that practical considerations, not just representational or descriptive considerations, bear on what we ought to say in response to philosophical and other inquiries.

Because Rorty aims to have a view that is pragmatist all the way down, it should be no surprise that the relation between Rorty's substantive metaethics and his ethics is parallel to the relation between his metaethical methodology and his substantive metaethics. In each case, the higher domain explains how inquiry should be conducted for the lower domain. And in each case, the higher domain claims that practical argument, *not* metaphysical argument, will determine the answers to the inquiries in the lower domain. It is well-known that Rorty argues for practical argument to tell us what to do ethically, but he also thinks that practical argument will settle other disputes, including metaethical ones. In talking about his disagreement with so-called realists, who are just non-pragmatists, Rorty says, "[the pragmatist] thinks that his views are better than the realists', but he does not think that his view corresponds to the nature of things."¹¹ In a second passage, Rorty commends Nietzsche (or at least his version of Nietzsche) because Nietzsche "thought that realism was to be condemned not only by arguments from its theoretical incoherence, the sort of argument we find in Putnam and Davidson, but also on practical, pragmatic grounds."¹² In a third passage, Rorty says that one should adopt his minimalism "on practical grounds. [This minimalism] is not put forward as a corollary of a

¹⁰ Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," p. 29 (my emphasis).

¹¹ Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," p. 23.

¹² Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," p. 32.

metaphysical claim that objects in the world contain no intrinsically action-guiding properties, nor of an epistemological claim that we lack a faculty of moral sense, nor of a semantical claim that truth is reducible to justification.¹³ Here we have three passages exhibiting Rorty's claim that substantive metaethical claims are to be justified practically, not on the basis of metaphysical argument.

2 Rorty's Bedfellows?

In the previous section, I provided an overview of Rorty's metaethical outlook, both the substantive metaethics and the metaethical methodology. In this section, I discuss a few scholars who have adopted a 'mixed' view, mixed in that they agree with Rorty in subscribing to a minimalist substantive metaethics but they reject his methodology. These scholars include Hilary Putnam,¹⁴ T.M. Scanlon,¹⁵ and indeed, Rorty himself.¹⁶ I begin this section by showcasing Putnam's 'mixed' metaethical outlook. He defends Rorty-style minimalism but does so by employing a pro-metaphysics/pro-epistemology methodology. Next, I show that Scanlon does the same. Finally, I demonstrate that Rorty, contrary to his own assertions, does the same.

First, I turn to Putnam. One can see that Putnam defends minimalism by noting how he responds to the three central questions in substantive metaethics. Recall that the minimalist responds to the three questions by saying, "Yes, yes, well..." On the cognitivism question, Putnam says that "ethical claims... are *bona fide* instances of assertoric discourse, forms of reflection that are as fully governed by norms of truth and validity as any other form of cognitive activity."¹⁷ On the skepticism question, Putnam agrees that we can have moral knowledge, and he offers arguments against those who would deny that by citing widespread moral disagreement as evidence for their skepticism.¹⁸ On the ontological question, Putnam, staying true to

¹³ Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," p. 33.

¹⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ T.M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ I should note that Ronald Dworkin defends a similar view as well. See Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25 (1996). For considerations of space, I do not discuss Dworkin.

¹⁷ Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*, pp. 74–75.

¹⁸ Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*, pp. 30, 75–78.

minimalism, say something waffling. On the one hand, Putnam says that accounting for ethical truths by “positing non-natural objects... is to offer a pseudo-explanation.”¹⁹ (And Putnam doesn't even *mention* philosophers like Peter Railton,²⁰ Nicolas Sturgeon,²¹ and Richard Boyd,²² who claim that ethical facts are identical to natural objects and events; the implicature: that view is so wrong one need not to consider it.) On the other hand, Putnam sees his task as dismantling what he calls “eliminationist” ontological strategies like that of J.L. Mackie.²³

How does Putnam arrive at this view? What is his metaethical methodology? He relies on highly contentious metaphysical and epistemological claims. First, Putnam argues that the truth of ontological relativism makes the entire practice of accounting for what there is, including the practice of talking about what normative things there are, faulty. Later, Putnam offers a companions-in-guilt argument. He argues that for mathematics we can be cognitivists, non-skeptics and (more or less) deny that there are mathematical objects, so we should be able to say the same thing in ethics. To sustain his argument, Putnam has to show that mathematical discourse is as he claims, and supposing that he is right about mathematics, he needs to show why ethics is sufficiently similar to mathematics. Putnam's arguments are through and through metaphysical; there is no Rortyan talk of “practical advantages”²⁴ or of what would be good to believe.

Having shown that Putnam adopts a mixed metaethical outlook, I turn to Scanlon. Like Putnam, Scanlon holds a minimalist substantive metaethics. He answers, “Yes, yes, well...” to the three central questions. On the cognitivity question, Scanlon calls his view a “realistic cognitivism about reasons”²⁵ and that means his view contends that “claims about reasons for

¹⁹ Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*, p. 78.

²⁰ Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986).

²¹ Nicolas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations,” in *Morality, Reason, and Truth: New Essays on the Foundations of Ethics*, eds. David Copp and David Zimmerman (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1985).

²² Richard Boyd, “How to be a Moral Realist,” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

²³ Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*, pp. 20–21.

²⁴ Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity,” p. 29.

²⁵ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 2.

action can be correct or incorrect... [while] recognizing that there may be limits to the range of cases in which such claims have determinate truth values."²⁶ In other words, Scanlon agrees that some moral claims are truth-apt. On the skepticism question, Scanlon affirms that we have moral knowledge: "It seems that we can discover normative truths... simply by thinking about these subjects in the right way."²⁷ On the ontological question, we get something more ambiguous. Scanlon admits that there are normative truths, but he says, "Normative truths, in my view, constitute a distinct realm and need no natural or special metaphysical reality in order to have the significance that we commonly grant them."²⁸ Elsewhere, Scanlon says, "Normative truths do not require strange metaphysical truth-makers."²⁹ In other words, Scanlon's is another 'ethics without ontology' sort of view.

Scanlon arrives at his minimalism in a peculiar way. According to Scanlon, there are various domains of inquiry such as the domain of the natural world, the domain of mathematics, and the domain of the normative. Each of these domains has its own standards for licensing particular claims. Ultimately, Scanlon is equivocal about how we should think about these standards. Sometimes, he talks in a metaphysically idealist way, suggesting that the standards come from us. For instance, in a response to a criticism from David Enoch, Scanlon seems to say that if we develop a discourse which licenses certain kinds of claims, those claims are true.³⁰ At other times, Scanlon talks more as a metaphysical realist, suggesting that there are external ways of assessing the standards of a domain.³¹ Whether Scanlon is a metaphysical idealist, a metaphysical realist, or a confused mix of the two, what remains clear is that a rich metaphysical story motivates his substantive metaethics.

²⁶ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 2.

²⁷ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 70.

²⁸ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 52.

²⁹ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, p. 62.

³⁰ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, pp. 29–30. This reply comes in considering Enoch's worry that Scanlon has to admit that there could be peculiar things called counter-reasons. Enoch's worry is that a community might start making claims involving counter-reasons; these claims would tell me people do whatever they have reason not to do. So long as there is a domain which licenses counter-reason claims, these claims are true, according to Enoch's worry. Enoch thinks that this is implausible and a necessary consequence of accepting Scanlon's minimalism. Scanlon just bites the bullet and admits that there could be counter-reasons.

³¹ Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, pp. 21–23.

Scanlon is a moral cognitivist because the domain of the normative licensed that claim, and that domain did that either because we talk that way or because there is some independent fact of the matter about how we should talk. Scanlon is non-skeptical about morality for the same reason. Scanlon's waffling on the ontological question stems from a mathematics-based companions-in-guilt argument, similar to that of Putnam voiced ten years prior.³² Just like Putnam then, Scanlon employs a metaethical methodology that is pro-metaphysics and pro-epistemology. He relies on highly controversial metaphysical and epistemic principles to buttress his minimalist substantive metaethics.

Despite the official story about Rorty's methodology, his metaethical outlook strongly resembles that of Putnam and Scanlon. We can begin to see this by examining a quotation. Rorty says that the argument for his answer to the ontological question is that "several hundred years of effort have failed to make interesting sense of the notion of 'correspondence.'"³³ This is ambiguous as written. If Rorty really meant that he endorses a substantive metaethical view because an opposing view is uninteresting, that would be the kind of practical argument that eschews metaphysics and epistemology. Of course, philosophers sometimes say that views are uninteresting when they actually mean that the view is false, implausible, or insufficiently explanatory, where insufficient explanation is grounds for deeming something false. If Rorty meant *that* when he said there is no interesting sense of correspondence, he would be right back to the very kind of metaphysics that he attempts to jettison. Which is it then?

The evidence favors the latter reading. Rorty endorses what he calls the "ubiquity of language" thesis, and this is the claim that we cannot compare our discourse to something non-discursive to check if the discourse is accurately tracking the non-discursive stuff.³⁴ Given the truth of the ubiquity of language thesis, that is, given our epistemic inabilities, it is unhelpful to talk about normative properties that render our normative claims true. We cannot play that game, so there is no point to trying. And not playing that game also means not asserting in Mackie-like fashion that there are no normative properties. Rorty's epistemic claim is that, for all we know there

³² Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, pp. 84–87.

³³ Rorty, "Introduction," CP, p. xvii.

³⁴ Rorty, "Introduction," CP, p. xxiii.

are normative properties, but since we cannot check, it is epistemically irresponsible to adamantly deny that there are normative properties in the world.

3 A Necessary Betrayal

If it is right that Rorty's commitment to the ubiquity of language thesis provides the support for his minimalism, Rorty was not practicing the metaethical methodology he preached. What can be said about this betrayal? One response is to admit that Rorty advanced arguments that were inconsistent with official methodology but to claim that Rorty had independent practical arguments that are consistent with his official methodology. The other response is to admit defeat, as it were, to see that Rorty *had* to break with the official methodology. In what follows, I develop the first response, expose its flaw, and then argue for the second response.

It might be thought that Rorty's ubiquity of language thesis is but the unfortunate residue of his early attempt to break with representationalism. In other words, it might be thought that Rorty was still ensnared by pro-metaphysics, pro-epistemology theorizing when he offered the ubiquity of language thesis in *Consequences of Pragmatism* in 1982. By the time Rorty's thought matured, so this line of reasoning continues, all these vestiges had been preened. Thus, Rorty's methodology (for metaethics and elsewhere) is driven by anti-authoritarianism, a thoroughgoingly practical argument. Anti-authoritarianism, for Rorty, is opposition to the idea that we ought to submit to some authority about how to live and think. In a 1999 article aptly-named "Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism," Rorty defends this idea.³⁵ At first glance, anti-authoritarianism seems like a strong, practical (as opposed to metaphysical) buttress for Rorty's minimalism. We should not talk of normative properties as making our moral statements true because this would give 'the world' authority to tell us how to run our lives. Anti-authoritarianism does not just make sense of the minimalist answer to the ontological question, it is also makes sense of minimalist answers to the cognitivism and skepticism questions. On the cognitivism question, the anti-authoritarian might begin by noting that there is no good practical reason to

³⁵ Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53 (1999).

doubt the truth-aptness of our moral discourse. When doubt arises, it arises in worrying that our moral statements do not correspond to something else, something that would *license* us in making moral statements. Since the anti-authoritarian opposes the thought of appealing to some licensing stuff, she has no reason to make the applicability of correspondence-talk the mark of the cognitive. On the skepticism question, the anti-authoritarian can tell a similar story. Moral skepticism seems attractive when one thinks that non-skepticism requires us to make epistemic contact with strange objects – the truthmakers of moral judgments – which seems dubious. However, if one jettisons the idea of moral truthmakers because one dislikes the authoritarian implications of such things, a key reason for skepticism is undercut.

Despite appearances, anti-authoritarianism is not a viable escape route for Rorty for two reasons. The first is purely *ad hominem*. Even in “Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism,” Rorty retreats to his old pro-epistemology methodology. He writes in one passage that “Pragmatists do not think inquiry can put us more in touch with non-human reality than we have always been, for the only sense of ‘being in touch’ they cognize is causal interaction (as opposed to accurate representation).”³⁶ In other words, humans can casually interact with the world, but they cannot accurately represent it;³⁷ for that reason, inquiry cannot be tasked with accurate representation.

Thus, we see that Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism is not the claim that we should not defer to guides about how to live and think; rather, he tells us that we should not defer to necessarily inscrutable guides about how to live and think.

Of course, that was just an *ad hominem* attack. One can amend what Rorty says so that anti-authoritarianism stands on its own, stripped of epistemic and metaphysical claims. Or so it seems. Anti-authoritarianism, like other complex claims about how we should live, stand in need of some justification. These justifications inevitably turn on what the world is like,

³⁶ Rorty, “Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism,” p. 16.

³⁷ Note that in saying this, Rorty gets into another epistemic dispute with those who have ‘causal’ theories of justification and knowledge, such that causal interaction is the basis for claiming that one has accurate representations of the world. See, e.g., Alvin Goldman, “What Is Justified Belief?” in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George Pappas (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979).

what alternative ways of living are possible, our epistemic capacities, and the like. To justify anti-authoritarianism (and thereby minimalism) may not require a rich metaphysical story à la Scanlon; nevertheless, at least *some* metaphysical and epistemic assumptions are required.

I do not have an unassailable argument for the claim that Rorty must break with the official methodology and must play the pro-metaphysics, pro-epistemology game, but consider a thought experiment aimed at urging us in that direction. Suppose that someone, call him Plato, has the view that there are normative properties in the strongest, most ontologically-laden sense, that we can find these properties, and that these properties render our true normative statements true. Can Plato be persuaded to adopt a minimalist metaethics on practical grounds that assume nothing about metaphysics?

Suppose that Plato is out searching for normative properties in whatever way one does that and comes across a Rortyan. Further suppose that the Rortyan tells Plato, “Stop that activity because it’s bad for you.” Here, *it’s bad for you* is just a stand-in for an actual practical argument. To make that practical argument, whatever it is, one has to have some particular views about what people are like and what this activity is like to sustain this claim. One might understand the activity as something fruitless given our epistemic capabilities, as Rorty himself says, and that would sustain an *it’s bad for you* argument. One might understand the activity as slavish and too yielding to the authority of the world, which sustains the *it’s bad for you* argument. Suppose Plato asks about the alternative to ‘authoritarian’ ethical inquiry. Is the alternative following one’s desires? If so, the Rortyan needs to spell out how this is not just another way of being slavish to the world. To do that, one would need to offer a picture of what desires are like and what the self is like. Can we imagine an *it’s bad for you* argument that does not rely on detailed views about how the world is? At the limit, the Rortyan can just say “it’s bad for you because it is.” That is, the Rortyan can treat the practical claim undergirding his minimalism as entirely brute, basic, and inexplicable. This would be so ad hoc as not to merit being called a methodological argument at all. Leaving the limit-case alone, there is no logical alternative to relying on metaphysics and epistemology to buttress one’s substantive metaethics.

4 More Rortyan than Rorty

In this final component of the paper, I offer an argument for Rorty’s minimalism. This argument is supposed to instance a metaethical methodology more in line with Rorty’s official methodology. Though

metaphysical and epistemic commitments are inevitable, as I argued above, one need not to have extremely controversial commitments like those of Putnam, Scanlon, or indeed, Rorty himself. One might be a bit more ecumenical. Thus, I attempt to offer an argument that is practical, as Rorty suggests, but not purely practical, which would be basically impossible. The practical argument, though, is consistent with lots of ways the world might be.

Now, one might ask why a Rortyan should prefer an ultimately ecumenical basis for one's substantive metaethics. A full explanation cannot be offered here because a full explanation would require us to explain why Rorty's official metaethical methodology is an attractive one, and for reasons of space, that cannot be done here. However, if one grants that it would be good to jettison metaphysics and epistemology altogether and to argue for one's substantive metaethics on the basis of practical argument alone, one should be happy with the next best option, if that is unavailable. The ecumenical approach is the next best option. The ecumenical approach is a method of arguing for one's substantive metaethics that is practical but not purely practical, for the practical argument relies on an underlying metaphysics and epistemology, but an ecumenical metaphysics and epistemology. When one's practical argument relies on an ecumenical metaphysics and epistemology, one can show that if the world is best described in ways *a*, *b*, or *c*, there is still practical reason to hold a particular substantive metaethics. Now, this *approximates* not doing metaphysics and epistemology at all insofar as one need not engage in lots of metaphysical and epistemic argumentation in an effort to establish a unique view of the world, which is the only one consistent with one's practical argument. So much for justifying my ecumenical approach; now I turn to giving it.³⁸

Suppose there was a being, Delphi, who claimed to be omniscient. At first, those who encounter Delphi are doubtful about its claim to know everything, but after Delphi reveal personal information about the skeptics, they waver in their doubt. By the time Delphi is offering scientific insights that enable medical technologies, deep space travel, and other time-saving innovations, everybody is a true believer. Delphi's first pronouncements about ethics are perfectly normal. Delphi says that we ought to share resources with other

³⁸ The following thought experiment comes from my unpublished paper, "Ethical Pragmatism."

humans, that sex-based discrimination in employment is wrongful, that legal punishment should aim at rehabilitating the offender. But later, Delphi makes some strange moral judgments. Delphi says that it is moral requirement to kill one's first-born child and that enslaving other human beings is morally permissible. People who hear this have to decide what to make of these claims. The wisest choice, or at least the choice upon which most people settle, is believing that Delphi has described the ethical facts while denying that these facts should guide behavior. No one, then, is moved to act in accord with the distasteful principles Delphi announced.

What, if anything, does the Delphi hypothetical tell us about substantive metaethics? The hypothetical offers support for a kind of anti-authoritarianism, for it reveals a problem with blindly following an authority, namely that the authority might prescribe a way of life that we cannot endorse upon reflection. Given this *practical* problem with authorities, we might decide that talking about the truthmakers for moral claims is a bad idea; consequently, we might say that we do not need them. At the same time, one might worry that affirming moral error theory suggests another infatuation with authority, a kind of "If there is no God, all is permitted" thought. This practical problem with authority might lead us to distance ourselves from that view. Thus, we get to the minimalist answer to the ontological question. From here, it should prove easy to reach minimalist answers to the cognitivism and skepticism questions.³⁹ Admittedly, for all I have said so far, one might draw different, non-minimalist inferences upon reading the hypothetical. The point here is not to convince anyone that the Delphi hypothetical uniquely supports minimalism but rather to indicate how it could be used for minimalism.

The Delphi hypothetical is the kind of ecumenical approach that is the next best option for someone committed to Rorty's official metaethical methodology. The hypothetical does support a kind of anti-authoritarianism, but it is quite specific. The hypothetical casts aspersions on the idea that there is a realm of moral facts which should serve as guides on how to live; it does not involve more general opposition to deference to the 'authority of the world.' A more general anti-authoritarianism of that kind would raise hard metaphysical questions about how relying on our beliefs and desires is not just a special case of deferring to the authority of the world. To understand the problem that the people in the Delphi world face does not

³⁹ One could rely on the argumentative strategy sketched above in Section 3.

require too many specific metaphysical or epistemic assumptions; in fact, there are lots of ways the world could be that are consistent with the possibility of Delphi and the problem it presents. Thus, to raise the Delphi hypothetical and to use it to support a minimalist substantive metaethics does not require engaging in much metaphysical or epistemic argument, which best approximates Rorty's ideal of jettisoning metaphysical or epistemic argument whole cloth. Of course, the Delphi hypothetical does carry some assumptions. For instance, the hypothetical turns on the ability to judge that p states a moral obligation and judge that conforming to p would be repugnant. Some philosophers think that one cannot have judgments like that.⁴⁰ Even in making this assumption, the advocate of the Delphi hypothetical is quite ecumenical. It is much tougher to show that some event, which is not logically impossible, is metaphysically impossible than it is to assume that the event is possible while perhaps unlikely. Even if one is doubtful on that score, it remains true that relying on the Delphi hypothetical to motivate a limited anti-authoritarianism is a less pro-metaphysics, pro-epistemology methodology than Rorty's own ubiquity of language thesis. In short, this strategy is more Rortyan than Rorty himself.

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⁴⁰ Many metaethical non-cognitivists are among the deniers. See, e.g., R. M. Hare, "'Ought' and Imperatives," *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

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