

Metaethics and Its Discontents: A Case Study of Korsgaard

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Realism and expressivism are both true in their way. But establishing that realism is true in *that* sense is not the *end* of moral philosophy, in either sense of “end”: it is only the *beginning*. (Korsgaard 2003b: 118)

Expressivism, I believe, is like realism also true after all, and also in a way that makes it boring. (Korsgaard 2003b: 122 n. 49)

When we think of the subject this way, we will not be inclined to think that there is a difference between doing “meta-ethics” and doing “normative” or practical ethics. The attempt to specify the meaning and reference of an ethical concept will point fairly directly to practical ramification. This represents another way in which constructivists break with the platitudes of twentieth century ethics. (Korsgaard 2003b: 121 n. 44)

1. Introduction

These striking passages from Christine Korsgaard express one way of giving shape to an otherwise inchoate discontent with traditional metaethics that has been growing in recent years among philosophers with otherwise widely differing views. The discontents we have in mind do not simply champion a competitor to the likes of noncognitivism or realism; they disapprove of supposed presuppositions of the existing debate: an indefensible distinction between metaethics and normative ethics, a misplaced priority of the theoretical over the practical, outdated conceptions of mind and language, or a reductive, scientific naturalism. They do not want to generate a new theory *within* metaethics, they want to go *beyond* metaethics by replacing it with something that is more responsive to the concerns that really animate, or should animate, the

search for the “sources of normativity”.

Such discontent is widespread, though not always published. It is also hard to engage with since the differences with traditional metaethics go deep enough that it can feel as if two different paradigms are talking past each other. Our goal here is to begin this engagement by focusing on the work of one philosopher, Christine Korsgaard. She is widely taken as someone who has expressed, and argued for, one type of discontent. It shares much with other types, both Kantian and non-Kantian, and thus our discussion, focused though it is on her work—indeed, on only parts of her work—has broader implications. Our official thesis is perforce restricted to our case study: we argue that Korsgaard fails to go beyond metaethics.

In our experience, it immediately strikes some as quite implausible that Korsgaard is trying to do any such thing. It is worth beginning with a brief consideration of this response. The response comes in two conflicting forms. First, that Korsgaard is not engaging with contemporary metaethics at all; she is just doing something else. Second, that Korsgaard is just trying to present another theory *within* traditional metaethics. She is not a discontent in our sense; no doubt she sees something wrong with the theories on offer, but she has no aspirations to, somehow, go beyond metaethics.

Neither form of the response can be correct however—at least not obviously so. First, Korsgaard repeatedly and explicitly sets up her own account of normativity in contrast with “substantive realism” or “dogmatic rationalism”, two labels that she uses more or less interchangeably. She insists that the “realism” her view is meant to be contrasted with is not the general normative position that there are correct answers to normative questions about what we should do—a position that merely marks out a contrast with nihilism (Korsgaard 1996: 35). Rather, she emphasizes, the realism she wants to oppose is, as she puts it, “*substantive moral realism*”. It is “the view that there are answers to moral questions *because* there are moral facts

or truths, which those questions ask *about*” (Korsgaard 1996: 35).⁶ According to substantive realism, moral requirements must be given “some sort of ontological foundation, by positing the existence of certain normative facts or entities to which moral requirements somehow refer” (Korsgaard 1997: 218). Substantive realism thus is clearly a view identified by specific metaphysical and semantic commitments. She also repeatedly sets up her own view in contrast with a position, usually associated with Hume, which she calls “empiricism” (Korsgaard 1997: 218-219). It is harder to pin down precisely what she takes this position to involve, but, perhaps it is fair to say, it seems to involve an empiricist epistemology, a naturalist ontology, and a methodological tendency towards reductions to this naturalistic ontology.

In any case, it seems clear that Korsgaard identifies her opponents by commitments traditionally used to identify metaethical theories and not theories in normative ethics. Thus whatever else she is doing it seems clear that she takes her own position to somehow provide a superior *alternative* to such metaethical theories. However, in order to demonstrate the superiority of her position over traditional metaethical theories she must engage with metaethics to some extent. These theories were articulated to answer certain questions that traditional metaethics posed. If her theory is better, then, at the cost of absurdity, it must be better at answering the questions metaethics has traditionally asked, or, as our language of going beyond metaethics has meant to suggest, better at answering questions that, in some sense, metaethics should be asking. Her project thus cannot simply bypass metaethics altogether.

Second, passages such as the ones we started the paper with make it clear that Korsgaard does not want simply to present another theory within metaethics. In addition to those passages, there are other passages in which she claims that Kantian constructivism represents an alternative

⁶ Emphases in original.

to the view of normative concepts that is shared by contemporary cognitivists and noncognitivists alike (Korsgaard 2003b: 106). Within contemporary metaethics the distinction between cognitivism and noncognitivism is indeed usually taken to provide a complete partition of the space of theories. Thus a rejection of both types of theories, and a rejection of some purported shared assumption, is just the kind of wholesale rejection of contemporary metaethics that we want to mark by our talk of going “beyond” metaethics. Our use of “beyond” is further justified by the kind of charge apparently laid against realism and expressivism in the quotes above. The charge is not simply of falsehood—the kind of charge that a normal, straightforward competitor would make. Indeed, Korsgaard grants that the traditional theories are, in some sense, true. Rather, her charge is that the full range of metaethical theories, and the assumptions about normative concepts shared by them, presumably, somehow miss the point of moral philosophy. Her Kantian alternative is not merely another theory within metaethics; rather, the very presuppositions of metaethics are to be rejected—indeed the very idea, apparently, that there is some identifiable, distinctive domain of metaethics is to be rejected. This, then, still roughly, is what we mean by the aspiration to go “beyond” metaethics.

The central task of this paper, then, is that of interpreting Korsgaard’s texts to see how her own position is supposed to contrast with both realism and expressivism, both cognitivism and noncognitivism, both dogmatic rationalism and empiricism, and thus go beyond metaethics. We defend our thesis that she fails to go beyond metaethics by arguing that, in fact, she fails to distinguish her position from either realism or expressivism and fails to provide an account of normative concepts that shows what is wrong with such theories. If successful, we will have provided a challenge to those who would like to leave behind metaethics to tell us exactly what the mistake is supposed to be.

2. Metaethics and Normative Ethics

In order to go beyond metaethics, Korsgaard has to engage with traditional metaethical theories at least to the following extent: she needs to show us what is wrong with both realism and expressivism. Even if realism and expressivism turn out to be in some sense true, Korsgaard thinks that they are also failures in some sense. Our general strategy will be to argue that what are supposed to be claims that conflict with realism or expressivism in fact fail to do so. We will rarely attack the arguments for these claims. What we will attack instead is the argument against realism and expressivism—and thus, presumably, metaethics—based on these claims. These claims (and the arguments for them) fail to undermine realism or expressivism because Korsgaard fails to show that they actually conflict with realism or expressivism in the first place. They fail to conflict because though they may appear to be metaethical claims they in fact are not obviously so and indeed are most charitably interpreted as either claims within normative ethics or normative psychological claims in the philosophy of action, claims compatible with several different metaethical accounts of those same claims.

This strategy may appear to run the risk of ignoring Korsgaard's intention to undermine the distinction between normative ethics and metaethics. However, our strategy is compatible with taking this intention seriously. Korsgaard cannot undermine the distinction simply by assuming it away.¹² The distinction is to be undermined as a consequence of her arguments against realism and expressivism. An argument for the claim that her view is different from, and conflicts with, either realism or expressivism cannot presuppose that the distinction has been undermined.

Indeed, we will argue that part of the explanation for why she fails to go beyond metaethics

¹² This claim should be qualified. One could posit the rejection of a distinction and then show how the rejection of the distinction in fact leads to a better theory. This would give reason to reject the distinction. The sense however in which the resulting theory is a better theory, and *a fortiori* what makes it a *different* theory, cannot then in turn presuppose the distinction.

is that she, like many other discontents, fails to appreciate all the ramifications of the traditional distinction between normative ethics and metaethics. Blame should be shared here by the practitioners of traditional metaethics; the distinction is usually briefly mentioned and often accompanied by a note of warning that it may not in the end be defensible. This belies what we think is the philosophical reality, namely, that there is a family of important distinctions behind the use of the traditional distinction between metaethics and normative ethics—distinctions which we ignore at our philosophical peril. We begin therefore with an attempt to rearticulate the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics.

We take normative ethics to be continuous with our everyday human practices of making normative judgments. As Shelly Kagan puts it, normative ethics “involves substantive proposals concerning how to act, how to live, or what kind of person to be”. If anything distinguishes it from our everyday practice, it is that it “is concerned with stating and defending the most basic moral principles” that, given further input about specific circumstances, tell us how to act, how to live, or what kind of person to be in those specific circumstances. These basic moral principles thus “systematize” and, in one sense, ground our more specific moral judgments. They ground these specific moral judgments by showing that they can be derived from more general moral judgments, the general moral judgments that just are these basic moral principles (Kagan 1998: 2). The radical claim that no systematization is possible, expressed perhaps by some forms of particularism, is the limiting case of theories in normative ethics.

Metaethics is the second-order investigation of the practice of making moral judgments—the everyday practice and the more philosophical practice of normative ethics. Metaethical investigations do not attempt to figure out which moral judgments we should make, but rather try to understand what is going on when we engage in the practice of making moral judgments. The point of metaethics is to give an account of what it is to think, and express, a normative thought,

not to tell us which normative thoughts to think.

This description of the metaethical task allows us to see the hidden unity behind the lists of “second-order” questions that are usually used to identify the domain of metaethics.¹⁴ We need to know what kinds of mental states are being had when we think moral thoughts and if these states have content, then we need to know what the content is—questions of moral psychology. We express these mental states in language and so an account of what the content is will have to fit with an account of “*semantic function* of moral discourse”—questions of meaning (Miller 2003: 2). If the function is to state facts, then a full metaethical account will state what kind of fact these are and how we can know them—questions of metaphysics and epistemology.

Non-reductive realism and non-cognitivism are examples of positions that give competing answers to these questions. A non-reductive realist might claim, for example, that the moral judgment that x is right expresses a belief that x has a normative property. He might accept a referential semantics according to which moral language is about moral facts constituted by non-natural normative properties. And he might hypothesize that we access these facts through some faculty of non-empirical, rational intuition. Non-cognitivists, on the other hand, usually reject a referential semantics for moral terms. They claim that moral judgments do not express truth-evaluable beliefs in normative facts, but express non-depictive motivational states such as desires, preferences, or emotions. Non-cognitivists are therefore free to accept an ontology restricted to natural properties. They do need to provide some account of what we are doing when we say, for example, that we know that x is wrong; however, they will deny that the relevant epistemological account will involve a story of how we are tracking a *sui generis* realm of normative facts.

¹⁴ Consider, for example, (Miller 2003: 2) and (Kagan 1998: 4).

Now, as we have already noted, the usually much briefer statements of the distinction between normative ethics and metaethics are also usually followed by a general note of warning that the distinction may not in the end be defensible. Take Shelly Kagan again. He follows the statements above about normative ethics with the usual identification of metaethics by a list of questions. He then goes on to argue that in fact there is a “continuum rather than a sharp line” between normative ethics and metaethics (Kagan 1998: 5-6). We are willing to grant in principle that there is a continuum of some kind, but we think that it is crucially important to be very clear about the kind of continuum present. It is precisely this clarity that we will try to provide next. The fundamental thrust of our discussion, and the conclusion that we will need for the rest of the paper, is that one can have a recognizable theory in normative ethics—one can have made significant progress in normative ethics—without having covered much ground at all at the metaethical end of the continuum. This is important for us precisely because we want to claim that Korsgaard’s views, though recognizable views in normative ethics, do not commit themselves sufficiently on metaethical matters to conflict with, and thus be alternatives to, realism or expressivism.

Let us begin then with Kagan’s arguments for a continuum. Kagan focuses on the justification of moral claims including the very general ones of concern to normative ethics:

When doing normative ethics we try to defend and justify substantive normative claims. But to do this, obviously enough, we have to have views about what it is you need to do to provide a moral claim with a good defense. That is, in doing normative ethics we will be presupposing some kind of account—either a developed one or at least a working understanding of one—of justification in ethics. But the topic of justification in ethics is itself one that actually belongs to metaethics. In short, doing normative ethics requires

having views about metaethical issues. (5)

Put this abstractly, Kagan invites potential confusion. Consider the kind of justifications we often appeal to when engaged in normative ethics. We often appeal to intuition: we ask what judgment a proposed moral principle would require for a particular situation and then ask ourselves whether the judgment intuitively seems the right one to make. If it does not, then this is often taken as a defeasible reason to reject the moral principle. However, our intuitions, or our willingness to override intuitions, seem sensitive to evidence that a moral principle does a good job of systematizing our other particular judgments or leads us to think that we now have clear intuitions about a case that puzzled us before. Now it is certainly right to say that in engaging in such a process of “reflective equilibrium” we are presupposing that this process yields justification. We may thus be presupposing that the correct metaethical account contains an epistemology that vindicates the claim that this process yields justification.

It is unhelpful, however, to describe the acceptance of such presuppositions as “having views about metaethical issues” (5). To see this, it helps to note that everyday moral claims involve this presupposition as well. If I sincerely and literally assert that killing John was wrong, then I am presupposing, it might plausibly be argued, that the correct metaethical account will not be an error theory. There are three things to notice about this presupposition. First, for all that has been said, this presupposition is compatible with the full range of non-error-theoretic metaethical theories both cognitivist and non-cognitivist. Second, obviously, the presupposition is compatible with having no specific positive metaethical account and no arguments for any metaethical view. Third, the presupposition is merely that. It is defeasible and may turn out to be false once we actually look at the balance of metaethical arguments. Thus the sense in which such a presupposition may involve “having views about metaethical issues” is an extremely thin

one. To put the point starkly, imagine the look of puzzlement, or worse, on the astronomer's face were one of us philosophers to say, "Yes, I too have views about astronomical issues: I think there are stars".

Returning to the more complicated case of reflective equilibrium justifications of moral principles does not change anything significant. Again we may well be presupposing the falsity of error theory and we are perhaps presupposing systematicity in the normative realm and a tendency of our intuitive judgments to lead to the correct moral judgments. However, again, there are versions of the full range of non-error-theoretic metaethical theories both cognitivist and non-cognitivist that are compatible with these presuppositions. These presuppositions are again compatible with having no positive metaethical account and are again defeasible.

Rather than thinking of these presuppositions as constituting a metaethical view, it makes more sense to think of them as features of the practice of making moral judgments that the correct metaethical account needs to explain. Our practice of making moral judgments—including normative ethics—presupposes, arguably, that these judgments are true and that they are justified. That is a deep feature of our practice and one that metaethics has to explain whether or not the metaethical account vindicates them.

However, Kagan seems to think that he has another, and better, argument for his continuum claim. When "we attempt to provide a basis or foundation for the substantive moral claims of normative ethics" we will

inevitably ... appeal to larger metaethical conceptions of morality's purpose and point.

That is, in the course of defending a given theory about the foundations of normative ethics, when we try to explain why it is that the various features of that theory should seem attractive and plausible, inevitably the claims we make will themselves simply be metaethical claims about the nature of morality. At a deep enough level, normative ethics

does not merely draw upon metaethics—it simply becomes metaethics. (6)

Kagan makes two errors here. First, not every claim about the nature of morality is a metaethical claim in any interesting sense. Consider the claim that the point of morality is fundamentally the to promote the welfare, well-being or happiness of human beings. This could, plausibly, be a premise in an argument against the claim that trees have intrinsic moral rights and thus could be part of an argument for a particular set of basic moral principles. Furthermore, such a claim defeasibly constrains metaethics. However, we are certainly not very far along the path of explaining what it is to think a normative thought. The fundamental reason for this is that the claim is itself a normative claim. No doubt it is a normative claim about a range of normative claims (e.g. moral claims should advocate the promotion of human welfare), but it does not tell us whether, for example, in making a moral claim I am expressing the mental state of belief.

Second, for all that has been argued so far, there are metaethical theories that explicitly do not think that, in one important sense, ultimate justification requires drawing upon metaethics, let alone becoming metaethics. Such metaethical theories will be particularly important for the purposes of our argument with Korsgaard in this paper. Non-cognitivism, for example, entails that appealing to a non-cognitivist account does not support any particular set of moral principles over any other.¹⁷ Any defense of moral principles will always require explicitly making, or presupposing, further normative claims. The non-cognitivist account tells us what we are doing when we make these further normative claims but does not itself tell us which ones to make. For the non-cognitivist there is no going from “is” to “ought”—there is no stepping outside the circle of normative claims. Therefore, given that the non-cognitivist metaethical theory is a purely

¹⁷ Whether as a matter of psychological fact it tends to undermine our commitment to morality is another matter. The sense of “support” here is the sense in which a premise supports a conclusion in an argument.

descriptive theory, it does not help us defend any particular normative claim over any other.

We now look at a line of thought that Kagan does not explicitly bring up but that, we suspect, is also often thought of as undermining the distinction between normative ethics and metaethics. It too has to do with the matter of justification though here the point is not simply the matter of whether we can justify some particular moral claim; justify, for example, the claim that killing *S* is indeed wrong. Rather it has to do with *placing* morality within practical reason, explaining whether we have reason to do what morality demands, and if so, whether these reasons are derived from another branch of practical reason. There are various ways of proceeding here. One could point to specific substantive reasons for being moral, say, reasons of prudence. One might also argue for the necessity of certain claims: one cannot be an agent, say, unless one accepts the principles of morality.¹⁸ The amoralist is inconceivable, someone might argue.¹⁹ It might be thought that since these arguments, if correct, answer our most fundamental questions about morality (e.g., do we have reason to be moral?) without appealing to traditional metaethical theories, there must be something wrong with the traditional distinction between normative ethics and metaethics.

There are two ways of taking such claims of necessity, either of which leave plenty of room for metaethics. First of all, we might think that these necessity claims are merely descriptive. The claim that an agent is someone who accepts that he should act morally is on all fours with, say, the claim that humans are mortal. Understood this way these are not conclusions of normative ethics though they might be deployed in arguments for normative conclusions. I

¹⁸ We grant that the word “accept” here requires much explication. Some explication occurs immediately below; however, we return in more detail to such questions in our discussions in later sections of the details of Korsgaard’s view.

¹⁹ Our thanks to an anonymous referee for a different paper for highlighting the importance in a similar context of the example of the amoralist.

might try to convince you to accept the principles of morality by either singing the praises of being an agent or reminding you that you already think that you are an agent. Here the role the descriptive claim plays in the arguments of normative ethics is essentially no different from the role many other run-of-the-mill descriptive claims play, (e.g., actions of type x tend to cause pain).

Since these descriptive claims about agency are claims of necessity, we will feel the pressure to explain the necessity. Is the necessity, for example, the result of conceptual relations? For example, it might be argued that it is a conceptual truth about agents as such that an agent accepts that he should act morally. Explaining the necessity in this way is indeed a second-order task which, since the content that it is claimed that agents necessarily accept is normative, might well be a task for metaethics. However, as far as normative ethics is concerned, these necessary descriptive claims can be treated just like any other necessary descriptive claim. That is, it is of no particular relevance to the questions of normative ethics how this necessity is to be explained. A clear and motivated division of labour between normative ethics and metaethics can still be maintained.

Secondly, we might think, however, that these necessary claims are necessary normative claims. The claim that one cannot be an agent unless one accepts the principles of morality should be understood as the claim that an agent ought to accept the principles of morality and this “ought” is inescapable—there is nothing an agent can do to have this “ought” not apply to it. The necessity here is what Fine calls “normative necessity” (Fine 2002). This necessity is shared by many other claims made within normative ethics: maximizing utility is right, killing innocents is wrong, and so on. Understood this way the claim about agents is a normative claim straightforwardly part of normative ethics.

The division of labour, though, is still clear. Metaethics takes up the task of providing an

account of what we are doing when we make such a normative claim and, other things equal, will attempt to provide an interpretation of the claim that squares with the (apparent) necessity. Is the necessity the result of the semantics of normative claims? Is it, for example, to be explained by conceptual relations? Is it to be explained by reductions of the normative to the non-normative? The apparent necessity, of whatever kind, possessed by the claims is part of the data the metaethicist must account for or, at theoretical cost no doubt, explain away.

Finally, we do count views that argue that there is no way of getting outside of normative thought to explain it, and therefore that no answers to metaethical questions are possible, as doing metaethics. However, this type of quietism, which claims that no metaethical theories are possible, is not equivalent to merely failing to state a metaethical position. One might pursue normative ethical tasks while ignoring metaethical ones, leaving such questions for others to answer. This acceptance of a division of philosophical labor certainly would not commit one to the quietist claim that metaethics is impossible. Quietism is a bold position in need of justification, whereas the decision to pursue normative ethical questions instead of metaethical ones needs no philosophical defense. The point of metaethics is to give an account of what it is to think a normative thought or to show that such an account is impossible, not to tell us which normative thoughts to think or to point out which normative thoughts we cannot help but think.

3. Non-cognitivism

Let us return then to Korsgaard. We have argued elsewhere that Korsgaard fails to distinguish her position from non-reductive moral realism, what she calls substantive realism. We argue there that the fundamental explanation for this is a confusion between the tasks of normative ethics and those of metaethics. A main thread of her argument against the realist is that the realist fails to adequately place morality with respect to practical reason in the sense

discussed in the previous section. Even if these arguments were successful, and we argue that they are not, she would not have produced what she claims to produce, namely, a competitor to substantive realism. She would instead have presented us with a normative theory that is compatible with non-reductive realism (Hussain and Shah 2006).

It would be a mistake to conclude from those arguments that Korsgaard and the non-reductive realist have the same metaethical position. The fundamental problem is that her claims are compatible with different metaethical positions. To drive this point home we present in this section a noncognitivist reading of the position Korsgaard expresses in the “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason”. We think that the lessons learnt here can then be applied to her proposals elsewhere; however, we do not attempt that here. We argue that a noncognitivist interpretation is compatible with the details of her claims, fits quite naturally with broader themes in her work such as the importance of the "first-personal", and potentially provides responses to legitimate metaethical worries about non-reductive realism that may be lurking behind her own ill-formed objections to that view.

Korsgaard however officially rejects noncognitivism in favour of her own "constructivist" or "procedural realist" account of normative concepts. As we will see in section 3.2, her rejection of noncognitivism seems to rest on misunderstandings related once again to the failure to distinguish between different questions about normative judgments.

3.1 The Non-Cognitivist Interpretation of “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason”

Korsgaard takes as her topic the “normative foundation” of the instrumental principle. She suggests that she is searching for the an “explanation” of its “normative force”, an account of the normativity of the instrumental principle, or an account of “what gives the instrumental principle its normativity”. The interpretive problem we face immediately is that these expressions are

susceptible to two different readings. We could read them as suggesting that she intends to provide us with either a metaethical account of the normativity of instrumental reason or with an account within normative ethics—as we will argue in a moment, indeed two different kinds of accounts within normative ethics.

It helps here to start with the claim that “no particular thing can be *barely* valuable or right” (Darwall 1998: 8). We can draw a distinction between what *makes* an action good or right, on the one hand, and what the property of being good or right itself is, on the other. Thus the fact that brushing my teeth regularly will reduce plaque may *make* brushing my teeth good (for me); however, we do not want to claim, presumably, that the property of goodness itself just *is* the property of reducing plaque. Or to use a more theoretical example from normative ethics, I could, perhaps like G. E. Moore, think that what *makes* states of affairs good is that they are pleasurable. The good-making property thus might be naturalistic or psychological. However, I might deny that the property of goodness itself is the property of being pleasurable—it is a *sui generis* non-naturalistic normative property.²³ The two properties are related but not by identity. One brings about the instantiation of the other, but does not constitute it. Such right- or good-making properties are examples of what Kagan calls “normative factors” and as he emphasizes much of the investigation in normative ethics about normative factors can be, and is, carried out without asking more foundational questions (Kagan 1998: 17).²⁴

Now Korsgaard could argue for a reductive view that denied this distinction; however, until she has done that the distinction remains and with it an ambiguity in the expressions she uses to describe her project. There are perfectly understandable senses of these expressions according to

²³ We do not mean to suggest at all that right-making properties cannot be normative.

²⁴ See the previous section for a discussion of the question whether at the foundational level there is a distinction between normative ethics and metaethics.

which one might well say that one is explaining why one ought to brush one's teeth—and in this sense uncovering the source of the normativity of teeth brushing—by pointing out that the brushing of teeth reduces plaque. But these claims are best understood as first-order normative judgments about what makes brushing one's teeth good, not as providing a metaethical interpretation of what it means to say that reducing plaque is good, what metaphysical commitments such a judgment involves, or how we come to know that brushing one's teeth is good.

We should emphasize here that the fact that Korsgaard is talking about the principle of instrumental reason as opposed to claims about what is good or what is right does not immediately help us disambiguate. The distinction we have been emphasizing is plausibly a general feature of normative claims. Perhaps for any normative predicate N , if x is N , then x is N in virtue of or because some other predicate, F , such that x is F . Thus F is N -making. Take the predicate “is a reason”. Some consideration, that the grass is brown, can have the property of being a reason, say being a reason to water the grass. However, intuitively the consideration will have the normative property of being a reason in virtue of some other property it has, say, the property of being what I desire not to be the case. The same holds true it seems of many normative considerations that are reasons. That it would be good for Jane to have company this weekend might be a reason for Dick to go visit Jane because this consideration has the complex property of being about the good of Dick's mother, namely, Jane.

Again a reductive view—here a reduction of the normative to the normative—might deny, in some way, this distinction: thus one could insist that when the consideration is that x is morally good or that ϕ -ing is morally right, then there is nothing further needed for such a consideration to be a reason to produce x or to ϕ . Nonetheless the possibility of non-reductive views here too means that talk of “explaining” or giving the “source” of normativity is potentially ambiguous.

Similar points hold about rules, norms or laws. The range of locutions for norms and for claims about the correctness, validity, normativity, authority, and so on, of these norms both in ordinary language and in philosophical discussion is varied enough to add another layer of ambiguity. However, we can consider a simple case. Talk just of rules and take the rule, R , to just be a command: $\phi!$ For example: Eat your desert after the main course! Now we can make various claims about such a rule: R is the correct rule, we ought to R , R is the authoritative rule, and so on. These claims are normative claims and again there is a possible distinction between the property R has of being the rule we ought to follow and the property that R has that makes it be the rule we ought to follow. Thus one could have the theistic normative ethical theory that what makes R the rule we ought to follow is that God commands it without committing oneself to the meta-ethical theory that being the rule we ought to follow just is being the rule commanded by God.²⁵

Let us turn then to the instrumental principle. We can now see the ambiguity in Korsgaard's description of her task as searching for the an "explanation" of its "normative force", an account of the normativity of the instrumental principle, or an account of "what gives the instrumental principle its normativity". Using our formulation above, we can take the relevant rule or command, R , to be as follows: Take the means to your end! The relevant normative claim then is something of the following form:

- (1) For all S , S ought to R .

Now, a metaethical account would investigate what it is to think (1). It would be concerned with the usual questions. What mental state does such a claim express? Does the word "ought" refer to some *sui generis* normative property? And so on. However, there are many questions in

²⁵ See the useful discussion of these two different versions of the theist view in (Snare 1992: 14-20).

normative ethics that do not involve answering these metaethical questions. We could be concerned, for example, with what *makes* it the case that an agent ought to *R*. We could also be concerned with the task of, as we called it in the previous section, *placing* this claim within practical reason; explaining whether we have reason to do what we ought, according to (1), to do. We might also investigate how this “ought” claims relates to other “ought” claims, say, the claims of morality.

It is due to Korsgaard’s failure to clearly distinguish the two different versions of the task of explaining the normativity of instrumental reason that we are able to give a non-cognitivist reading of her claims about instrumental reason. We will use Allan Gibbard’s norm-expressivist account in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* as our basic model for noncognitivism (Gibbard 1990). We do this for two reasons: first, Gibbard’s account is one of the most developed versions of noncognitivism; second, Gibbard’s account has resources to respond to some of the traditional dissatisfactions with non-reductive realism that may be lurking behind Korsgaard’s rejections of realism. For reasons of space, we will have to assume a familiarity with Gibbard’s account though we will discuss some of the parts that would be controversial in the current context.

For the norm-expressivist, when one makes a normative judgment one expresses an acceptance of certain norms. Crucially, the state of norm-acceptance is not to be analyzed in the first instance as a belief in a normative proposition that is capable of being the object of knowledge, but as a non-cognitive motivational state. Gibbard builds out from an account of what it is to judge that an action is rational or irrational: to judge that an act is irrational is to express the acceptance of a norm not to do it. If an agent does not accept norms that tell him not to do an action, then the norms that the agent accepts permit the action. To judge that an act is wrong is to judge that it would be rational to feel guilty if I have committed it and resentful of someone else if he has committed it, and this in turn is to express an acceptance of norms that

permit feelings of guilt if I have committed the act and resentment towards someone else who has committed the act.

Let us turn now to Korsgaard's account of instrumental reason. In trying to reconstruct a positive metaethical position from "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason", we will end up considering several possibilities for such a reconstruction; however, we begin with what naturally come across as a family of potentially distinctive metaethical claims, namely, the claims that the will or action are supposedly constituted by certain principles or norms.

Her central positive claim seems to be the following:

To will an end just is to will to cause or realize the end, hence to will to take the means to the end. This is the sense in which the principle is analytic. The instrumental principle is *constitutive* of an act of the will. If you do not follow it, you are not willing the end at all. (244)

The problem, as Korsgaard realizes, is that this does not seem to allow for the possibility of instrumental irrationality. If it is logically impossible to will an end without taking the means to the end, then it is impossible to be instrumentally irrational—to will an end and fail to take what one recognizes to be the means to that end.

To prevent this she makes one negative claim about willing:

So willing the end is neither *the same as* being actually disposed to take the means nor as being a particular mental state or performing a mental act which is *distinct from* willing the means. (245)

And a positive claim about willing:

[W]illing an end just is *committing* yourself to realizing the end. Willing an end, in other words, is an essentially first-personal and normative act. To will an end is to give oneself a law, hence, to govern oneself. That law is not the instrumental principle; it is some law of

the form: Realize this end. That of course is equivalent to ‘Take the means to this end’.

So willing an end is equivalent to committing yourself, first-personally, to taking the means to that end. (245)

The most straightforward way to construct a non-cognitivist interpretation of Korsgaard's claims is to take all talk of willing to express a state of norm-acceptance. This is the obvious interpretation because thoughts of willing seem to be normative thoughts according to Korsgaard and taking normative thoughts as expressions of states of norm-acceptance is the heart of the Gibbardian norm-expressivist strategy. An obvious suggestion for the norm being accepted is "Realize this end!" To judge

(2) I will this end

is then to express my acceptance of the norm, "Realize this end!".

Korsgaard, recall, plausibly insists that “willing the end” must be distinct from “actually pursuing or trying to pursue the means to the end” (245) because otherwise, as she puts it, “there would be, so to speak, not enough distance between willing the end and willing the means for the one to *require* the other” (244). We are actually not quite sure how equivalence relations work in the case of laws and commands; however, we will here simply accept, for the moment, Korsgaard’s claim that “Realize this end” is equivalent to “Take the means to this end” (245). Given this, our non-cognitivist can now say that in thinking (2) I am also expressing my acceptance of the norm "Take the means to this end". Thus if I think (2), then, just as Korsgaard requires, there is a certain question I cannot sensibly ask: I cannot now wonder whether I should will the means (244). After all, in thinking or saying (2) I have expressed my acceptance of the norm, "Take the means to this end" and expressing my acceptance of that norm just is what I do when I judge that I will the means to this end. However accepting the norm to take the means to my end is not the same as “actually pursuing or trying to pursue the means to the end” (245).

This just follows from a general feature of Gibbardian norm-acceptance; one's acceptance of a norm is not the same as actually doing, or trying to do, everything it requires.²⁷

As we suggested at the beginning of this section, a non-cognitivist interpretation also puts us in a good position to capture a plausible version of Korsgaard's point that willing is essentially first-personal and normative. To start with we must insist that there is a certain interpretation of the first-personal claim that we think Korsgaard surely does *not* intend. Korsgaard surely does not want to deny that the following inference is perfectly legitimate:

(3) John willed this end

therefore

(4) John is committed to this end

therefore

(5) John is committed to taking the means to this end.

Presumably Korsgaard also does not want to deny that we, and not just John, can claim that John is irrational if he either does not take the means to the end he has willed or give up his end.

Here is at least one way a norm expressivist might go about saying what it is to think thoughts of this kind. Such claims have both a normative and non-normative component. In saying (3) and (4) I am claiming that John is in a certain state of norm-acceptance. That however

²⁷ It may appear that Korsgaard's rejection of any view according to which willing the end is *the same as* "being actually disposed to take the means" (245) rules out this expressivist interpretation of her view. But although it is plausible that the state of accepting the norm, "Take the means to this end", involves a disposition to take the means, there is no reason to think that it just is such a disposition.

is not a normative claim, it is a description of John's state of mind. But I am also expressing my acceptance of norms that require that when in this state, John transition into the state of accepting the norm: Take the means to this end.³² Whether John actually accepts this second norm neither confirms or disconfirms my claim, since this aspect of my claim is meant as an expression of my own norms about which norms John should accept, not as a description of the norms that John actually does accept.³³

As we have said already, what is at the heart of the claim that willing is “essentially first-personal” cannot be the view that claims of the form (3)-(5) are not allowed.³⁴ Rather what is crucial is that willing is not something that we can talk about if we are merely in the business of giving a descriptively adequate account of the world. It is only from within a normative practice in which we make normative judgments that we can think that someone has willed something. The contrast between “first-person” and “third-person” is the contrast between engaged participant and disengaged observer. Surely this is what Korsgaard is getting at. However, this is precisely what our non-cognitivist would say: talk of willing is normative talk, thus only someone normatively engaged can genuinely talk of willing. A disengaged theorist purely in the business of giving a descriptively adequate account of the world cannot say either (2) or (3)—at

³² For an analogous norm-expressivist treatment of belief ascriptions, see (Shah and Velleman 2005). They argue that when I claim that John believes that p I am making the descriptive claim that John is in a certain state of mind whose content is that p and I am expressing my acceptance of a norm that forbids John to be in this state if p is false.

³³ Of course more of the details of Gibbard’s account would be needed to give a full account of such normative statements about others. See, for a start, (Gibbard 2003: 48-53).

³⁴ Cf. her comments about causal judgments as being essentially third-personal as opposed to rational ones which are essentially first-personal. (Korsgaard 1997: 222 n. 23). Again the view cannot be that we cannot say, “I caused him pain”.

least if we agree with Korsgaard that talk of willing is essentially normative.³⁵

Our discussion above has been restricted to Korsgaard's article, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason"; however, we think that the strategy used for developing a non-cognitive interpretation of her views here can be extended to her other texts. The conclusion we draw from our discussion of non-cognitivism here and our discussion elsewhere of Korsgaard's rejection of realism is that her claims are compatible with both metaethical interpretations precisely because they are actually claims in normative ethics, not metaethics. That said there may be things to be said in *favour* of a non-cognitivist over a non-reductive realist interpretation of Korsgaard. A noncognitivist reading holds out promise that it *can* respond to some of the problems for the non-reductive realist position that we suspect lie behind Korsgaard's official objections. The problems that we have in mind are the familiar ones: non-reductive realism does not provide any illumination of normative content, leaves us with no account of what it is for a property to be a normative property, and provides no substantive epistemology that explains how we come to know normative facts. The noncognitivist does attempt to give a detailed account of the content of normative thought that will help answer epistemological and metaphysical questions about the normative. The issues here are far too complex to discuss briefly, but it is, we think, fair to say that noncognitivism requires nothing beyond an ontology of natural properties and relations, so it can avoid the metaphysical problems the non-reductive realist faces in postulating a layer of *sui generis* normative properties. Its epistemology, if it has one, is not one of tracking intrinsically

³⁵ The fact that Korsgaard's account can be interpreted so easily in non-cognitivist terms is not at all surprising. R. M. Hare quipped, "It may seem a far a cry from Kant to Professor Stevenson", but he went on famously to insist repeatedly across his works that his universal prescriptivism was a plausible interpretation of Kant and could account for Kant's insistence that moral claims were not empirical claims; that, as Hume insisted, one cannot get from ought to is; and that moral concepts were essentially practical and not theoretical. The quote is from (Hare 1964: 70). A brief summary of Hare on Kant is (Hare 1999: 11-16). See also (Hare 1997).

normative entities and so it also can avoid the epistemological problems the non-reductive realist faces in explaining how we can know normative truths.³⁶

3.2 Korsgaard's Official Rejection of Noncognitivism

However, Korsgaard clearly does *not* share our view about the potential usefulness of adding a non-cognitivist metaethics to her theory. Her most explicit statements about noncognitivism are expressed in two articles, “Normativity, Necessity, and the Synthetic a priori: A Response to Derek Parfit” and “Realism and Constructivism”, that also contain, in some ways, the most explicit positioning of her own view relative to other metaethical views. In these articles she claims that nothing is "gained" by introducing noncognitivism, that the distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism leaves no space for Kant, that the distinction itself rests on a theory of normative concepts that she wants to present an alternative to, and finally that noncognitivism may be true in a way but "boring".³⁷ Korsgaard's position towards noncognitivism is thus complicated even if it is fairly consistently negative in one way or another. We will argue in this section that her reasons for rejecting non-cognitivism seem to betray a misunderstanding of non-cognitivism and metaethics and fail to show how she can manage to go beyond metaethics.

Korsgaard wants to put into question an idea that she claims lies behind the distinction between cognitivism and noncognitivism in metaethics, namely, the idea that "what all of our concepts are *for*" is the description of reality, "that their cognitive job, so to speak, is to describe reality" (Korsgaard 2003b: 105). The implication is that what we need is the possibility that

³⁶ See (Gibbard 2003: pp. 221-235).

³⁷ (Korsgaard 2003a: 8) and (Korsgaard 2003b: 105, 106, 122 n. 49).

some concepts—the normative ones no doubt—have a *cognitive* job that is not to describe reality. Unless this assumption is dislodged she says, "it will continue to appear that moral realism is the only possible alternative to relativism, scepticism, subjectivism, and all of the various ways that ethics might seem hopeless" (Korsgaard 2003b: 105).³⁹ We wonder, though, what is being built into the use of "cognitive" here. After all, a contemporary non-cognitivist might well find Korsgaard's description of the missing position a pretty compelling statement of what the *non-cognitivist* takes to be the intuitive heart of *his* position. How is Korsgaard's anti-descriptivism supposed to be different than the traditional anti-descriptivism that looks very much like the heart of noncognitivism? Our only clue *here* is that she seems to want a "cognitive" job for these concepts other than describing reality. And we take it she would think that Stevenson and Hare, and their contemporary followers, are committed to the job not being cognitive. However, we worry that this may *just* be a misunderstanding about the term 'cognitivism'. Non-cognitivism and cognitivism are without doubt terms of art and so susceptible to the vagaries of individual philosophers' deployments. That said, there is still a reason why these terms are introduced and used, which has to do with the association between cognitivism and *knowledge*. The point of calling a theory of normative concepts non-cognitive is that the theory rejects the assumption that the role of normative concepts is primarily that of helping with knowledge—cognitive accounts are rejected precisely "for theorizing practical reason", for failing, again as Korsgaard herself puts it, to understand "the difference between knowledge and action".⁴⁰

³⁹ We should note that there are many different kinds of relativism and subjectivism and it is not immediately clear that they all entail that ethics is "hopeless".

⁴⁰ The first quotation is from (Korsgaard 2003a: 9) and the second is from (Korsgaard 2003b: 110). In the latter article she repeatedly attacks the idea that normative thought is primarily a matter of knowledge.

We suspect that there is more being associated with "non-cognitivism" than just, one wants to say, the *non-cognitivism*. This becomes apparent in the paragraph after her declaration that she wants a non-descriptive cognitive role for normative concepts. She claims that even before we get to her own alternative account we can see that there is "a problem with the distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in ethics" because it does not leave space for a theory like Kant's "according to which moral judgments are the conclusions of practical reasoning" (Korsgaard 2003b: 105).⁴¹ Here is her reason for claiming this: "A conclusion of practical reasoning is not obviously a description of a fact about the world, but it hardly seems like some sort of emotional expletive, either" (Korsgaard 2003b: 105). This is not helpful since either the phrase "some sort of emotional expletive" is meant to suggest some crude, simplistic theory—as surely this phrase would in ordinary language—or, if the phrase is meant to acquire its content from its reference to the complex and subtle theories of meaning and thought that non-cognitivists have provided, then the "hardly seems like" is unjustified.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that cognition is being confused with cogitation. A non-cognitivist theory is not a non-cogitative theory. All the major non-cognitivists—Stevenson, Hare, Blackburn, Gibbard—have complex theories about how practical reasoning proceeds in all its complexity. Indeed the traditional worries about noncognitivism *do* focus on whether they can capture the complexity of practical reasoning—thus the focus on the problem of embedding. We grant that the embedding problem is a real concern, but what is needed is a serious engagement with it, something that Korsgaard does not even attempt.⁴³

In a footnote in "Realism and Constructivism", Korsgaard claims that expressivism is true

⁴¹ She also mentions Aristotle.

⁴³ Such an attempt would also be hard to square with her claim later that expressivism is true.

but “boring” because it “describes moral language from the outside, as if we were not ourselves the creatures who face practical problems, but only someone else making anthropological observations about them”(note 49, 122). And in her “Response to Derek Parfit” she says “Nor is anything gained, in my view, by saying that the first person use (of normative concepts) is an *expression* of your endorsement rather than merely a statement describing your endorsement, since that is still describing the situation from the outside” (8-9). It is true that expressivism attempts to describe our moral practices from a vantage point that is external to that practice. It is also true that no prescriptions about what to do fall out of expressivism since, according to the expressivist, pronouncing on what to do requires engaging in the normative practice, not describing it. But if expressivism is true, as Korsgaard claims it is, it gives us a full-blown account of what it is to make a normative judgment, giving us answers to our semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological questions about moral discourse. It might seem, then, that Korsgaard just is not interested in these questions, and thus finds answers to them “boring” and unhelpful. However, she also claims that “Behind this stance is the idea that so long as we are reasoning we must remain at this anthropological level” (9). But this is not true of contemporary expressivist views. Gibbard, for example, claims that judgments of reasons, judgments of what to do, are made from, and practical reasoning is done, within the engaged participant’s point of view, whereas his expressivist account of these judgments and processes is given from within the disengaged anthropological point of view.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ And as to the alleged error about cognition committed by both realists and expressivists, until Korsgaard explains what the opposing non-descriptivist conception of cognition might be, it is difficult to make sense of this criticism. We take it that her account of normative concepts is supposed to provide this alternative account of cognition. Presumably this positive account of normative concepts is supposed to be provided by what she calls “constructivism” or “procedural realism”. We discuss this part of her view in (Hussain and Shah 2006).

3.3 Constitution, Inescapability, and Necessity

When we first introduced Korsgaard's claim that the "instrumental principle is *constitutive* of an act of the will" (Korsgaard 1997: 244) we immediately asked whether there was anything here that the non-reductive realist or non-cognitivist has to reject, and found that there was not. Let us now instead see whether there is anything here that allows us to bypass the traditional metaethical project altogether.

Here is one suggestion.⁴⁸ Showing that a principle is constitutive of the will, and thus of agency, is to show that no sense to be made of acting that does not involve following the principle of instrumental reason.⁴⁹ The correct theory in the philosophy of action thus shows that an agent necessarily follows the principle of instrumental reason. We take this to entail the claim that as a matter of logical necessity an agent takes the principle of instrumental reason to have rational necessity. Since, when I deliberate about what to do, according to Korsgaard, I must regard myself as an agent, I thus must regard myself as following the instrumental principle. It is unclear what type of necessity Korsgaard thinks is involved in regarding oneself as an agent or as regarding oneself as following the instrumental principle, but we will put this issue to the side. To engage in practical deliberation, then, I must regard myself as following the principle of instrumental reason, which entails that I regard the principle of instrumental reason as justified or rationally necessary.⁵⁰ No metaethical claim is apparently required to draw this conclusion.

⁴⁸ Our thanks to David Velleman for emphasizing this.

⁴⁹ It is important to bear in mind that "following" here is being used in a normative sense. In following the principle of instrumental reason I am, as Korsgaard puts it, committed to realizing the end and this committing of myself is "an essentially first-personal and normative act." (Korsgaard 1997: 245).

⁵⁰ Well, not exactly. The conclusion Korsgaard's argument actually entitles us to is that one must regard oneself as regarding the principle of instrumental reason as rationally necessary.

Let us assume that the argument goes through. Would this show that traditional metaethics is somehow beside the point or involves some deep misunderstanding? We think not. The argument, for all we have said so far, would show that I have to think that the principle of instrumental reason is rationally required but it would not show what it is to think this. Now there may well be an argument that nothing more can be said about what it is to think this, but notice that the argument so far does not show that more *cannot* be said. It would show that we do not need to do metaethics in order to see why all practical deliberators must conclude that they should follow the principle of instrumental reason. Metaethics, if this argument worked, would then be irrelevant to the justification of the principle of instrumental reason to practical deliberators. This would show that metaethics would not have practical significance, but it does nothing to show that metaethics would not be of theoretical interest.

Furthermore, we do not think that the argument actually quite succeeds in showing that metaethics is irrelevant to the question of justification. The reason for this is that the argument is assuming that no error theory is true. An error theory about normative judgments would be the view that normative judgments express truth-conditional beliefs about normative properties and that all atomic normative judgments that attribute normative properties are false. The falsity of error theoretic accounts is compatible with a wide range of metaethical theories. Recall how we put it. If I am engaged in practical deliberation, I have to regard myself as an agent. Talk of "regarding" does not quite tell us the attitude involved. There are other options, but the natural thought is that I have to believe that I am an agent. Believing that I am an agent, if Korsgaard is correct, entails believing that I ought to take the necessary means to my ends. The claim then is that there is no way that I can, clear-headedly, think about what to do without believing that I ought to take the necessary means to my ends. But this does not show that this belief is true. The argument does not show that this belief is true even if, when I think about what to do, I have to

belief that I am an agent and so believe that I ought to take the necessary means to my ends.⁵³

It might be replied on Korsgaard's behalf that there is nothing more to showing that the principle of instrumental reason is correct than demonstrating that it is a commitment that is constitutive of being an agent. The metaethicist's error, it might be claimed, is to think that there is an intelligible question about the truth of the instrumental principle left over once it has been demonstrated that the principle is constitutive of agency. The question whether it is true that one ought to take the necessary means to one's ends is answered precisely by showing that the commitment to the instrumental principle is inescapable for agents as such. Therefore it makes no sense to accept that a commitment to the instrumental principle is constitutive of agency and yet think that an error theory is so much as an intelligible option.

Even if we allow that such a demonstration counts as providing a justification of a normative principle, and thus as ruling out an error-theory about that normative principle, it can hardly settle all of our epistemological questions about normative principles. Just as a full epistemological account of our beliefs about middle-sized physical objects will go beyond saying merely that we know facts about these objects by looking to explain what it is about these objects and our visual faculties that makes looking a means of gaining such knowledge, so too a full epistemological account of our normative judgments will explain why demonstrating that the commitment to a normative principle is constitutive of agency is a means of showing it to be correct.

One might insist that our understanding of the unique way in which normative judgments are justified exhausts our understanding of their nature; nothing more can be said about the

⁵³ One could interpret the attitude of "regarding ... as ..." in, say, expressivist terms, thereby dismissing error-theories without having to show that the normative judgments constitutive of agency are true, but then, as far as we can see, one would be doing traditional metaethics.

epistemological, semantic, and metaphysical issues. This would be to take a quietist position with respect to metaethics. In order to acquire the right to this position, however, one needs to explain why there is no further elucidation to be had of our normative judgments beyond a demonstration of their method of justification. We have argued that although Korsgaard does seem to think that metaethics rests on some kind of mistake, she fails to give the kinds of grounds that could justify such a claim.

4. Conclusion

We began by taking Korsgaard as a prime example of a certain kind of discontent with metaethics. The discontent expresses itself as not merely a set of objections to existing theories in metaethics but as the view that there is something wrong with the very way in which the debate is set up, the very way in which the questions of metaethics are posed. As we have argued, it is not plausible, to think that Korsgaard is merely doing something unconnected to traditional metaethical concerns—after all she sets her position up in opposition to realism and empiricism and presents herself as showing how despite the fact that realism and expressivism might be true they nonetheless, in some other sense, miss the point of moral philosophy. We have tried in the space available here to make sense of these claims. However, we have argued that in fact Korsgaard fails to distinguish her own positive position from either realism or noncognitivism—noncognitivism being the focus of this paper, the point about realism having been argued elsewhere. This makes it hard to see how her view can be an alternative to these traditional views let alone a position from which we can see what was confused with the presuppositions lying behind these traditional metaethical theories. We also attempted to see how her claims about the inescapability of certain presuppositions of agency could be used to show that these traditional metaethical positions were somehow fundamentally confused. We

argued that the claims about inescapability did not show that the questions traditional metaethical theories were designed to answer were somehow illegitimate or that the answers provided by these traditional theories were philosophically irrelevant to anything that might be of concern to us in moral philosophy.

The fundamental problem, we have hoped to have shown, occurs at the very beginning. In framing her inquiries about the “source of normativity,” Korsgaard fails to distinguish the metaethical question of what it is to make a normative judgment from normative questions about which normative judgments to make or even which normative judgments we cannot help but make. This leads her to mistakenly think that by making a strong case for the position that certain normative judgments are constitutive of agency, she has given an alternative to the non-reductive normative realist’s and non-cognitivist’s metaethical positions about the meaning, metaphysics, and epistemology of these normative claims. Her opposition to non-reductive realism and non-cognitivism similarly suffers from a misunderstanding of the metaethical tasks these theories seek to accomplish.

We suspect that the problems with Korsgaard’s form of discontent can be generalized to other discontents—there is a systematic failure to appreciate how a range of questions in normative ethics can be asked, and even answered, while leaving open metaethical issues. The discontent with metaethics is often based on misunderstandings of its tasks and goals. Careful assessments of other versions of discontent will have to be done elsewhere; however, we hope that the attempt in this paper to clarify the different tasks of normative ethics and metaethics and the detailed analysis of Korsgaard’s version of discontent goes some way towards indicating how such assessments of other versions of discontent would proceed.⁶¹

⁶¹ We would like to thank Allan Gibbard, Pamela Hieronymi, Elijah Millgram, Tamar Schapiro, Yonatan Shemmer, Kenneth Stalzer, and Sharon Street for very useful conversations

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