

## Introduction

# The Nature and Explanatory Ambitions of Metaethics

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### INTRODUCTION

This volume introduces a wide range of important views, questions, and controversies in and about contemporary metaethics. It is natural to ask: What, if anything, connects this extraordinary range of discussions? This introductory chapter aims to answer this question by giving an account of metaethics that shows it to be a unified theoretical activity. According to this account, metaethics is a theoretical activity characterized by an explanatory goal. This goal is to explain how actual ethical thought and talk—and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about—fits into reality.

We begin by introducing and developing this account, and illustrating it via discussion of a simple illustrative metaethical theory: Simple Subjectivism. We then explain important upshots of the characterization. Our account is novel and controversial, as is the status of metaethics as a theoretically fruitful project. We thus compare our account to competing characterizations of the field, and explain how our account permits us to address certain challenges to the theoretical significance of a distinctively metaethical project. In the conclusion, we explain why, given our account, one might think that metaethics *matters*, and explain how we understand the history and future of self-conscious metaethical theorizing. As we will emphasize, we should expect new ways of approaching the explanatory project at the heart of metaethics to emerge in the coming years, as the tools and resources we have for tackling that project expand. Our hope is that by emphasizing the centrality of the explanatory project itself, rather than just focusing narrowly on the views that have been developed so far by those engaged in that project, we can help encourage and facilitate the development of new questions, arguments, and views that help move the field forward.

## THE PROPOSAL

In the Introduction, we promised to argue that metaethics is a *unified* theoretical activity. To get a feel for this claim, consider the following three groups of questions:

- Group 1:** Is it good to be vegetarian?  
 When (if ever) is abortion ethically permissible?  
 How much should I give to charity?  
 Is assisted suicide ethically okay?
- Group 2:** Is it always ethically permissible to promote the best outcome?  
 Do facts about virtuous agents explain facts about right action?  
 Do the actual outcomes of an action typically explain whether it is right or wrong, or are the expected outcomes the ones that matter?
- Group 3:** What are we doing when we sincerely utter simple ethical sentences such as ‘Killing innocents is wrong’? Are we expressing beliefs about some subject matter? Or are we doing something else?  
 Are ethical judgments necessarily motivating?  
 Are there ethical facts?  
 Can armchair reflection provide ethical knowledge?  
 How does ethics relate to the kinds of facts that we study in the natural and social sciences?

The questions in Group 1 are often regarded as core questions in *applied ethics* (or “practical ethics” or “case ethics”). Those in Group 2 are often regarded as core questions in *normative ethics* (or “systematic ethics” or “ethical theory”). And those in Group 3 are often regarded as core questions in *metaethics*. So we can sharpen our initial question about what unifies metaethical discussion by asking: Does it make sense to group the Group 3 questions (and others like them) together, in a way that excludes questions in Groups 1 and 2? And if so, *why* does that make sense?

One reason it might make sense to group these questions together is that the groupings are sociologically significant. Certain people (e.g., a certain subset of professional philosophers) tend to group them together, and it could be useful to track these tendencies. However, we think that the Group 3 questions—at least as they arise in many philosophical contexts—share a deeper theoretical unity. The first step toward seeing this unity is to notice that we can understand each of these questions as arising naturally in the context of very general attempts to explain central apparent features of ethical thought and talk. Consider three examples.

First, it appears to many of us that speakers who express systematically divergent ethical views are often thereby engaged in genuine disagreement, rather than merely “talking past” each other. One natural attempt to explain this appearance involves answering the first Group 3 question by claiming that simple ethical sentences express genuine beliefs about a shared factual subject matter. If correct, this would help vindicate the appearance of genuine ethical disagreement, because conflicting beliefs about a single matter of fact constitute a paradigmatic form of genuine disagreement.

Second, consider the range of distinctive roles that ethical thoughts appear to play in deliberation and action. For example, when someone sincerely judges that she ought to perform an

action, we typically expect that she will perform it, if given the opportunity. One natural way to explain this would involve answering the second Group 3 question by claiming that ethical judgments necessarily motivate. Because motivation is central to the explanation of action, this view could help explain why we expect that people will act on their ethical judgments.

Third, consider the appearance that we have considerable ethical knowledge. Answering the third and fourth Group 3 questions by claiming that there are ethical facts, and that armchair reflection can provide knowledge of those facts, would be natural components of a theory that attempted to vindicate this third appearance.

The three apparent features of ethical thought and talk just mentioned are instances of the three sets of puzzles—about shared ethical subject matter, the practicality of ethics, and ethical knowledge—that Mark van Roojen (2015, chapters 2–4) plausibly claims are central to contemporary metaethics. As van Roojen points out, most systematic metaethical theories will aim to address each of these sets of puzzles. One way to do this is to offer explanations intended to *vindicate* the relevant appearances. (Our examples were the beginnings of such vindicating explanations.) However, it is also possible to respond to these puzzles by attempting to *explain away* the apparent feature in question, purporting to show it to be misleading. For example, someone who denied that armchair reflection could provide ethical knowledge might seek to offer a compelling explanation of why we are tempted to believe this method could provide it.

These examples suggest that answers to the paradigmatic Group 3 questions can be used to naturally address certain explanatory concerns. We claim further that what unifies these questions is a distinctive explanatory aim. Our account (which draws on views developed in McPherson 2012 and Plunkett and Shapiro forthcoming) proposes that we can understand what metaethics is in terms of this explanatory aim:

**Metaethics:** Metaethics is that theoretical activity which aims to explain how actual ethical thought and talk—and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about—fits into reality.

The next section will unpack the many moving parts of this account. However, even before clarifying the details, it should be plausible that this account provides a unifying explanation of the significance of the three appearances mentioned above. Genuine ethical disagreement is a central apparent feature of actual ethical thought and talk, as is the range of distinctive roles that ethical judgments appear to play in deliberation. And the appearance that we have considerable ethical knowledge is a central aspect of the apparent relationship between ethical thought and talk on the one hand, and what that thought and talk is distinctively about, on the other.

This account also suggests a clear way of explaining the contrast between metaethics, on the one hand, and normative and applied ethics, on the other. For these other projects can themselves be understood as each having a characteristic and distinct explanatory aim. Roughly, these projects aim to explain what we ought to do, either in specific salient clusters of contexts (applied ethics), or with maximal explanatory generality (systematic normative ethics).

### Explaining the Account

We now explain each element of our account of metaethics. Before we proceed, however, it will be useful to flag a central element of our approach. Many of the terms we use in

our account of metaethics are themselves the sites of intense metaethical controversy. To gloss these terms too precisely would thus be an attempt to *adjudicate* central metaethical debates. Because our aim here is to illuminate the nature of the metaethical project, we will aim as much as possible to avoid such adjudication. The result is that our account of the explanatory project that unifies metaethics is a *schematic* one. We take this to be a virtue of our account: we think that metaethics is a project that can be pursued in many different ways, depending especially on one's commitments in other areas of philosophy such as the philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology, etc.

In light of this, we will typically aim to orient the reader to our way of understanding metaethics by offering paradigm cases of the notions that we deploy. We begin in this spirit by considering our account's focus on *ethical* thought and talk. Paradigms of ethical thought and talk include the Group 1 and Group 2 questions mentioned in the Introduction (the questions in applied ethics and normative ethics), together with thought and talk that directly *answers* those questions. It also includes thinking or uttering prosaic claims like *embezzling is unethical* or *you ought to call your friend back tonight*. (We return to the issue of characterizing the ethical in the section "Ethics, Morality, and Robust Normativity," below.)

Next, consider the account's focus on ethical *thought and talk*. It is common for much of metaethics to focus narrowly here: for example, to provide an account of the meaning of the term 'ethically good', or of what it is to have the thought that an action is right. While such a narrow focus may be useful for some purposes, ethical thought and talk as we are understanding it includes much else, including a range of kinds of ethical expressions (beyond 'ethically good') and a range of ethical thoughts (beyond those about which actions are right). Moreover, it is worth underscoring here that we take it to include patterns of ethical discourse and reasoning, and (if there are such things) presentational and emotional states that have ethical content.

Our reference to *actual* ethical thought and talk identifies metaethics as a *hermeneutic* or *interpretative* project. Metaethics is about the sort of ethical thought and talk that people actually engage in—including those parts that we might come to think are mistaken, unfortunate, or misguided. This characterization reflects an important feature of much metaethical practice. Consider two examples: First, one core metaethical question is whether—and under what conditions—people are motivated by their ethical judgments (see David Faraci and Tristram McPherson's chapter "Ethical Judgment and Motivation"). This is a question about the connection between *actual* patterns of ethical thought and motivation, rather than those we might wish for. Second, an important research program in metaethics is *error theory*. Error theorists claim that our *actual* ethical thought and talk commit us to some sort of objectionable error, such as belief in things that do not exist (see Jonas Olson's chapter "Error Theory in Metaethics"). Our reference to actual thought and talk is intended to bring out the hermeneutic character of the project as illustrated by these examples, and not (for example) to stipulate that metaethicists ignore *counterfactual instances* of ordinary ethical thought and talk.

Because we understand metaethics as a hermeneutic project, we distinguish metaethics from certain projects that aim to reform or replace our use of expressions like 'ethically right' or 'ethical obligation'. For example, some error theorists think that while ethical talk commits one to false metaphysical views, it nonetheless plays certain important functions in our lives. Some of these philosophers propose replacing our existing

ethical thought and talk to eliminate the errors but retain the functional benefits (see the discussion of revolutionary fictionalism in Richard Joyce's chapter "Fictionalism in Metaethics"). One might also advocate reforming ethical thought and talk even if you thought it involved no metaphysical error. For example, one might think that reforming it would promote important practical goals, like social justice, or that reforming it would allow us to more smoothly accomplish our epistemic goals. Influential work that explicitly aims to reform existing understandings of ethics includes Brandt 1979/1998 and Railton 1986. Reforming projects like these involve asking normative questions about which concepts we *should* use, and not just descriptive questions about the ones we do use. (Such normative questions about thought and talk are what we can call questions in *conceptual ethics*. See Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b.)

Ethical thought and talk appears to be *about* certain distinctive things, such as ethical facts, properties, and relations. Consider a paradigmatic example: some ethical sentences are about *what agents are ethically obligated to do*. Such sentences are about agents and actions, but what makes them *distinctively ethical* is the ethical feature—ethical obligation—that they are about. The sense of 'aboutness' we have in mind here is *intensional*: compare the way that the name 'Pegasus' is *about* a winged horse. As this example illustrates, ethical thought and talk might be in this sense *about* certain things without referring to anything that actually exists. Most views in contemporary metaethics take ethical thought and talk to be about something in *some* intensional sense, even if only in a minimalist or deflationary one. However, there are some views on which ethical thought and talk is not about anything, in even this thin sense. (Some views on which ethical words or concepts are too defective to generate intensions have this implication, as do some non-cognitivist views; see Matthew S. Bedke's chapter "Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism" for discussion.) This is why we say the explanatory task of metaethics partly concerns what ethical thought and talk is distinctively about, *if* that thought and talk is distinctively about anything. Our account is intended to be neutral concerning whether ethical thought and talk *is* about anything distinctive, or indeed about anything at all, since these are points of live metaethical controversy.

Just as with the other notions involved in our account of metaethics, we intend an ecumenical gloss on 'explaining', 'reality', and 'fitting in'. As with 'ethical', the interpretation of these terms is a controversial moving part in central metaethical debates. For example, explanatory ambitions are ubiquitous in philosophy, but the relevant notion of explanation can be understood variously in pragmatic terms, in terms of entailment, or in terms of a variety of asymmetric metaphysical relations. Similarly, there is a variety of importantly different philosophical conceptions of reality. These include glosses in terms of *what is* or *what is actual* (contrasted in Quine's canonical [1948]), and others which associate it with *what is fundamental* (e.g., Fine 2001). Different views on these topics will naturally lead to differing ambitions for metaethics, but our characterization of metaethics treats it as compatible with various resolutions of these debates.

We can say a bit more about the notion of 'fitting in'. As Frank Jackson says, we expect our best account of the world to be more than just a *big list* of what there is; we expect it to include some account of how different elements of reality *relate* to each other (1998, 5). For example, Jackson thinks that this account should feature *basic* and *non-basic* ingredients, together with a story about how these relate to each other. In this spirit, we can think of metaethics as attempting to spell out how ethical thought and talk—and what (if anything)

such thought and talk is distinctively about—relate to each other and to the relevant other elements of reality. Note that one way that ethical reality could fit into reality could involve some elements of ethical reality being among the *basic* ingredients of reality.

Jackson's *particular* story, both about which elements are basic and about how such "fitting in" should proceed, is highly controversial: for example, his approach is based on a cognitivist understanding of the parts of thought and talk he is concerned with, and makes extensive use of a particular version of conceptual analysis. We intend the 'fitting into' locution to connect to the broad aims we can recognize in Jackson's work, while abstracting as much as possible from his controversial views about how to realize those aims.

On our account, metaethics is a theoretical activity characterized by its *aim*. Our talk of aims here should be understood in terms of *success conditions*: those conditions such that the activity—qua that activity—counts as successful. This is the sense in which an instance of chess playing is successful if it concludes in one's victory. Thus, on our view, metaethical theorizing is successful insofar as, and to the extent that, it explains how actual ethical thought and talk—and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about—fits into reality.

In what follows, for ease of presentation, we will sometimes gloss our view of metaethics as follows: metaethics aims to explain how *ethical thought, talk, and reality* fit into reality. This brings in the idea of *ethical reality*. As we understand it, ethical reality is that part of reality which ethical thought and talk is distinctively about. We want to emphasize that this gloss of metaethics be understood *purely* as a slightly misleading gloss on the official account we have spelled out in this section. For clarity, let us briefly mention three ways in which this gloss might be misleading. First, it elides our emphasis on *actual* (as opposed to reformed) ethical thought and talk. Second, it replaces our official talk of 'what—if anything—ethical thought and talk is distinctively about' with talk of 'ethical reality'. This might seem to presuppose (controversially) that there is some ethical reality. For example, on an 'actuality' gloss on reality, it might seem to presuppose that some ethical properties or relations are actually instantiated. Third, given our gloss on 'about' above (where we emphasized that it is an *intensional* notion of 'about' we have in mind), ethical *reality* will—on many accounts of reality and intentionality—be considerably narrower than what ethical thought and talk is distinctively about. We hope that, where it is important to do so, readers will read our official account back into the pithy gloss, rather than being misled by the latter.

### An Illustrative Example: Simple Subjectivism

If you are reading this introductory chapter, you have likely heard of *Simple Subjectivism*. Most philosophers working in contemporary metaethics take the view to be indefensible. However, in virtue of its simplicity, it serves as a useful example to illustrate our account of metaethics, as well as some of what makes the metaethical project challenging.

The core of the view is a partial theory of ethical thought. Roughly:

**Simple Subjectivism:** What it is for someone to judge that *x* is good is for that person to believe that she approves of *x*.

Simple Subjectivism proposes an explanation of how a certain type of ethical thought—*goodness judgments*—fits into reality. It explains the nature of goodness judgments in

terms of belief and approval. With this theory in hand, many questions about how to fit goodness judgments into reality then become natural tasks for our general accounts of the psychological states of belief and approval.

As we have emphasized above, there are many sorts of candidate explanatory relations, so the sort of constitutive account offered by Simple Subjectivism is only one possible way that one might seek to fit ethical thought into one's broader theory of mind. Indeed, one could even begin the task of fitting ethical thought into reality by stating that goodness judgment is a primitive and unanalyzable element of reality. A complete theory of fit for such a primitivist account would include things like explanations of how goodness judgments interact with non-ethical thoughts in reasoning and deliberation.

Note that a full explanation of how ethical thought *as a whole* fits into reality would need to address the many elements of ethical thought beyond goodness judgments. Simple Subjectivism is silent on these further topics. For example, this thesis says nothing about judging something right or virtuous, or about the nature of ethical deliberation. But even setting aside its focus on *good*, Simple Subjectivism is far from being a complete metaethical theory. Part of fitting ethical thought into reality involves explaining the relationship *between* ethical thought and talk.

It would be natural to extend Simple Subjectivism to address this task. For example, the subjectivist might claim that assertion of sentences of the form 'x is good' conventionally *express* the psychological state of judging that x is good. This linkage constrains but does not explain how ethical *talk* fits into reality. So it would be natural for the Simple Subjectivist to extend her view further to include a consilient *semantic* view. For example, she might claim that the semantic content of a sentence of the form 'x is good' is *that the speaker of the sentence approves of x*. The resulting partial accounts of ethical thought and talk put us into a position to ask how the developing subjectivist theory fits with our more general accounts of assertion and of the relationship between semantic and mental content. One possibility is that the resulting theory is compatible with these accounts being fully general; another is that the theory requires that we give different underlying accounts for assertion and semantics, depending on whether they have ethical content.

Our developing subjectivist theory is thus far silent concerning *ethical reality*. It would be natural to augment it with a consilient *metaphysical* view. For example, the subjectivist might argue that there is a class of properties, good-relative-to-A (good<sub>A</sub> for brevity). For something x to be good<sub>A</sub> is for A to approve of x. And for it to be a *fact* that x is good<sub>A</sub> just is for it to be a fact that A approves of x. We can further link the metaphysical account to the accounts of thought and talk by adding natural views about *truth*: for A's judgment that x is good to be *true* just is for A to approve of x (or equivalently, given our account of ethical properties, for x to be good<sub>A</sub>). Similarly, for a sentence of the form 'x is good' to be true is just for the speaker of the sentence to approve of x.

It is again worth emphasizing the diversity of ways in which a metaethical theory might propose to fit ethical reality into reality overall. For example, the simple subjectivist's view is naturally glossed as a *reductive* view. It is plausible that on this account the property good<sub>A</sub> reduces to the property *being approved of by A*. Indeed, it is naturally glossed as an account of what goodness *is*, or, put another way, a real definition of goodness.

The account of truth just offered illuminates one way in which ethical thought and talk can fit (or fail to fit) with ethical reality. It also has implications for another sort of fit: *episte-*

*mological* connections between ethical thought and ethical reality (insofar as there is any). This ties into an aspect of metaethics that many people find pre-theoretically gripping: many people are motivated to do metaethics by puzzlement about how or whether ethical knowledge could be possible (see Matt Lutz and Jacob Ross' chapter "Moral Skepticism"). Our developing version of Simple Subjectivism does not yet include an epistemological account, but it does entail that, if someone tends to judge that *x* is good when she approves of *x*, then these judgments will be *reliable*. This potential to explain how reliability is possible in ordinary circumstances can play an important role in explaining how ethical knowledge is possible (see Joshua Schechter's chapter "Explanatory Challenges in Metaethics"). Finally, because ethical truths are, on this account, facts about one's own psychology, it may seem plausible that one can achieve justified belief or knowledge simply on the basis of intuitive reflection from the armchair (see Elizabeth Tropman's chapter "Intuitionism in Moral Epistemology").

We hope that this discussion of Simple Subjectivism and how it can be developed is helpful in at least three ways. First, it helps illustrate how broadly we are thinking of the task of fitting ethical thought, talk, and reality into reality. Second, it helps illustrate our core idea that metaethics is a unified theoretical activity. The ways that we developed the initial theory are all recognizable elements of a metaethical theory, which will be familiar to those engaged in contemporary metaethical inquiry. And far from being a random collection of theses about different topics (e.g., mental and semantic content, metaphysics, and epistemology), the collection of claims that we discussed was recognizably unified, as a candidate partial explanation of how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. The view we developed is far from complete, but we predict that if you continued to add more features to this theory, aiming to more fully achieve this explanatory aim, those features would continue to be recognizable as elements of a metaethical theory.

The version of Simple Subjectivism developed here is an elegant theory. Moreover, it has a number of features that many will take to be significant points in its favor. Here we mention two. First, consider a variant on a point that we made above: when someone sincerely judges that something is ethically good, we ordinarily expect her to be moved to pursue it. Simple Subjectivism can explain this: the judgment that sleep is good is a belief that one approves of sleep, on this account. It is not at all surprising for someone to be moved to pursue things she approves of. So, provided that one is not self-deceived about what one approves of, the account can explain why we expect people to be moved to pursue what they judge to be good. Second, the developed version of the view promises to smoothly integrate ethical thought, talk, and reality into a fully *naturalistic* account of reality overall. In light of the explanatory power and massive achievements of scientific theorizing, many philosophers take providing a naturalistic metaethical account to be an important goal (see Peter Railton's chapter "Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics").

The subjectivist account we sketched also illustrates how challenging metaethical theorizing is. For despite its virtues, this view also faces several deep problems. Consider four examples, each of which is an instance of a broad *kind* of problem that many systematic metaethical theories face.

First, simple forms of subjectivism have difficulty explaining genuine ethical disagreement. Suppose that I think that being vegan is good and you think it is not good. On Simple Subjectivism, my belief concerns my own psychology, and your belief concerns your psychology. This seems at least initially insufficient to constitute genuine



disagreement. For our beliefs are about two entirely different things, and, thus, it seems there is no rational conflict between my belief and yours.

Second, the view might seem hard to fit with our experience of the deliberative significance of ethical thought. The thought that something is good appears different from the thought that I approve of it. For example, the former thought appears at least on its face more objective and less introspective than the latter (see David Enoch's chapter "Non-Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics").

Third, the view seems to yield the wrong extension for the predicate 'good'. In short: most of us think that there can be good things even if we do not currently approve of them. The Simple Subjectivist picture thus seems to conflict with our substantive views about goodness.

Fourth, the two points just made also have implications for the epistemological plausibility of the view. We often agonize over the considerations that seem to us to be on either side of an issue when trying to figure out what is good. But if the Simple Subjectivist picture we sketched were correct, this would be misguided: we should seek instead to simply introspect the truth of the matter.

In light of these and other objections, we are inclined to reject the Simple Subjectivist picture out of hand. But it is worth noting two characteristic and important methodological points here. First, it is open to the subjectivist to seek to *debunk* some of these appearances: to suggest that they are *misleading* as characterizations of actual ethical thought and talk. If successful, such a debunking explanation will entail that the appearance in question is no longer a constraint on our seeking to explain how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. Second, it is natural to ask whether the subjectivist can *modify* her view in a way that preserves the virtues of the simple view, while avoiding some or all of the objections just identified (to explore contemporary views that can be understood in this way, see Alex Silk's chapter "Metaethical Contextualism" and Isidora Stojanovic's chapter "Metaethical Relativism"). In any case, our aim here was to offer a simple instance of metaethical theorizing to exemplify our account of metaethics. We now return to that account.

## CONSEQUENCES AND CLARIFICATIONS

The preceding section set out the heart of our account of metaethics, understood as a theoretical activity. This section develops the account in three ways. First, we explain our assumptions about how our proposal should be assessed. Second, we explain how we think about the relationship between metaethics as an *activity*, and the idea that certain *claims* are metaethical claims. Finally, we explain how facts about the connections between different kinds of normative standards (e.g., the standards of morality and practical rationality) matter for metaethics.

### 'Metaethics' as a Theoretical Term

A guiding assumption of our project is that 'metaethics' is a theoretical term, and that we should evaluate accounts of metaethics accordingly. Negatively, the meaning of theoretical terms is less beholden to prior usage than ordinary, non-theoretical terms. Consider

for example the surprising discoveries that atoms are divisible and that space is not well modeled by Euclidean geometry. Positively, theoretical terms earn their keep either by referring to a theoretically interesting object of inquiry, or by being instrumentally useful to inquiry. While both of these criteria provide some reasons to favor fidelity to existing use, these reasons can be outweighed, as the examples just given suggest. This is especially true if existing use is somewhat heterogeneous (we will see in the section “Competitors, Challenges, and Complications” that this is the case with the term ‘metaethics’), and there is a theoretically illuminating way of regimenting that usage. In the preceding section, we emphasized various ways that our account captures core features of existing use. However, if there are apparent intuitive counterexamples to our view, we do not take this to necessarily constitute a serious objection to our account. Depending on one’s views about meaning, one may thus want to think of our proposal as providing a *reforming definition*, in the vein of Richard Brandt (1979/1998) and Peter Railton (1986). However, because ‘metaethics’ is a term of art, our account may not count as reforming at all: theoretical utility may be a central constraint on the “unreformed” meaning of this term.

It may be worth addressing a potential confusion here. In the previous section, we emphasized that metaethics is a *hermeneutic* project, which aims to theorize *actual* ethical thought, talk, and (maybe) reality. This may seem to be in tension with our claim that ‘metaethics’ is a theoretical term. An analogy shows that it is not: ‘adverb of quantification’ is a theoretical term from semantics, which earns its keep in virtue of its role in helping semanticists explain actual linguistic patterns. Terms that we introduce (or reform) in the process of doing metaethics—and, on our view, ‘metaethics’ itself—should be understood in the same basic way: namely, as earning their keep in virtue of their role in a significant theoretical project.

A second implication of our account concerns the significance of metaethics. We have occasionally encountered the assumption that the term ‘metaethics’ denotes inquiry that is somehow deserving of more attention, deeper, or more “properly philosophical” than issues within normative and applied ethics. Our characterization of ‘metaethics’ as a theoretical term rests in part upon the idea that metaethics is *an* important theoretical activity. However, it does not imply the comparative judgment just mentioned. We think the comparative judgment is too sporadically accepted to count as a conventional presupposition of the word ‘metaethics’. But if it were, this would be one way that our account would reform existing usage. We think the comparative judgment is simply false: there are *many* philosophically deep and important issues within ethics itself, including the very applied ends of the field. Our account, however, is *neutral* with respect to this kind of comparative judgment: it would make little sense to build controversial judgments of comparative importance into our account of a theoretical notion.

A third implication of our account concerns fundamental vs. non-fundamental metaethics. One common pattern in metaethics is for a theorist to identify what she takes to be the most fundamental explanandum in the area—perhaps *value*, or *ought*, or *reasons*, and perhaps with a focus on concepts first, or language, or properties—and then to focus her metaethical investigations on this target. (For example, our exposition of Simple Subjectivism focused on *judging something to be good*.) If there is an explanatorily basic ethical concept (or property, or relation, etc.), then this might well be a sensible strategy. On the one hand, such an account might at least suggest illuminating answers to certain general metaethical questions. And on the other hand, an account of the basic

concept (or property, or relation, etc.) might put us in an excellent position to extend our metaethical theory to non-basic explananda. On our account, however, this is at most a strategic point: even if it turns out that there *really is* some fundamental, explanatorily basic ethical concept (or property, or relation, etc.), the non-basic explananda are still part of metaethics. Non-basic ethical thought, talk, and reality are parts of ethical thought, talk, and reality, and hence part of the explanatory purview of metaethics as we understand it. Such strategic considerations aside, non-basic explananda can be at least as worthy of attention as the basic explananda.

### Metaethics as an Activity, and Metaethical Claims

Our discussion of Simple Subjectivism sought to illustrate the point that metaethics can be well understood as an activity with the aim of explaining how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. This section explains how we understand the relationship between the metaethical activity and this aim, and between metaethical activity and metaethical claims.

To begin, notice that someone could seemingly make important contributions to metaethics without explicitly endorsing the aim that we identify. This is especially plausible when we consider a philosopher who is dedicated to working out the nuances of some specific problem, as opposed to building a comprehensive account of ethical thought, talk, and reality. This is possible, we suggest, because metaethics is a *collective* theoretical project: the kind of scope and unity suggested by our discussion of Simple Subjectivism need not be exemplified in the work of a single individual, but can instead be characteristic of a theoretical pattern that emerges from the work of many. The nuance-focused philosopher can count as doing metaethics in virtue of the relationship of her work to this collective project. Because of this, someone could contribute substantively to this project without thinking of herself as contributing to it, or even conceiving of the project as such.

Consider next how this collective project is organized. In expository work on metaethics, it is common to regiment metaethical views into broad clusters such as *naturalistic realism*, *expressivism*, etc. (we follow this common practice in Part I of this volume). We think it is useful to think of these clusters as *research programs*: families of views, each of which aims to systematically explain how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. Within each of these research programs, there are certain theses and patterns of explanation that help make it a recognizable *type* of approach to the explanatory project of metaethics. And within each of these research programs, philosophers direct a great deal of constructive and critical attention to debating the elements of specific systematic and comprehensive metaethical views. This activity can be understood as attempting to identify the theory that best realizes the overall research program.

An example here might help. Consider a classic kind of *non-naturalistic realist* view in metaethics. This sort of view characteristically accepts the metaphysical thesis that the fundamental ethical facts (or truths or properties) are *sui generis*. This might be cashed out in a variety of ways, e.g., that the *real definition* of ethical facts cannot be given in fully non-normative terms, or that the fundamental ethical facts are *ungrounded* in any other kind of fact (whether naturalistic ones, such as facts about how human brains work, or “super-naturalistic” ones, such as facts about God). This sort of metaphysical view fits smoothly with certain claims about ethical thought and talk. For example,

non-naturalists typically accept some form of *cognitivism* at the level of ethical thought, according to which, roughly, ethical judgments are *beliefs* (see Matthew S. Bedke's chapter "Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism"). Non-naturalists typically pair this with a commitment to *descriptivism* about ethical talk, according to which, roughly, the meaning of ethical terms is to be understood in terms of their contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they occur. Finally, non-naturalists typically embrace some kind of *intuitionism* in moral epistemology. Especially ambitious non-naturalists try to defend a relatively comprehensive package that includes claims about these and many other topics (e.g., Shafer-Landau 2003, Enoch 2011). However, many more philosophers contribute to the research program of non-naturalistic realism without ever developing such a package.

Our proposal gives a unified and fundamental account of what the metaethical *project* is. This leaves open the question of what makes a *claim* metaethical. We think the idea of a *metaethical claim* is less philosophically illuminating than that of the metaethical project. We favor a pluralist, context-sensitive account of talk about metaethical claims.

The basic idea of our account is that we can identify a number of different salient ways in which an individual claim or thesis can be related to the metaethical project. In different contexts, it can be philosophically helpful to focus on one or another of these relations. For example, a claim might be a key part of a certain attempted metaethical explanation. Or it might be something that, if true, would entail that this metaethical explanation is incorrect. We could also choose to focus on a claim's relation to a *specific* theory that has emerged within the metaethical project, or to all possible such theories, or to those theories that are currently considered live options, etc. We think there is a variety of sensible uses of 'metaethical claim' that align with each of these options, and that none of them is clearly more theoretically useful than the others. In different contexts, different of these relations, and different given attempts to do metaethics, will be more or less salient. We thus think that 'metaethical claim' can usefully be treated as a context-sensitive term that picks out different things in different contexts, depending on what is most salient in that context. We would offer a similar contextualist account concerning what counts as a 'metaethical question', or a 'metaethical controversy', or a 'metaethical issue', or a 'metaethical theory', etc. For example: a 'metaethical theory' can, in some contexts, be understood as a theory that has emerged within the metaethical project. In other contexts, a 'metaethical theory' can be understood as the foundation for a given research program that aims to complete the overall explanatory project of metaethics.

One important motivation for the contextualist account just offered is that certain claims play a central role in some metaethical projects but not in others. In order to drive this point home, we will discuss an example in some detail. Consider the claim that the fundamental ethical facts are dependent on our mental states. Call this thesis *mind-dependence* (for a more detailed discussion, see Connie S. Rosati's chapter "Mind-Dependence and Moral Realism"). One clear example of mind-dependence was offered by our extended version of Simple Subjectivism. On this view, goodness facts depend on certain mental facts: for it to be a fact that  $x$  is good<sub>A</sub> just is for it to be a fact that A approves of  $x$ . It is tempting to take the question of whether ethical facts are mind-dependent to be a paradigmatic and central metaethical question. However, this becomes much less clear when we consider a paradigmatic metaethical research program: *expressivism*.

On one rough gloss, metaethical expressivism can be understood as the conjunction of three claims: (i) ethical judgments consist, at the most basic explanatory level, of some kind of *non-cognitive* attitude (e.g., desires or intentions); (ii) ethical statements consist

of expression of the relevant non-cognitive attitude, rather than (e.g.) of the belief that one has that non-cognitive attitude; and (iii) the meaning of those ethical statements is to be understood or explained in terms of such expression. (For a more detailed discussion, see Elisabeth Camp's chapter "Metaethical Expressivism.") By itself, the truth of expressivism—which is a thesis about ethical thought and talk—doesn't settle whether or not mind-dependence about ethical facts (or properties, truths, etc.) is correct or not. However, within the contemporary research program, expressivism is typically coupled with significant attempts to interpret our talk of ethical reality. (This is another example of the way that metaethical research programs tend to aim to explain how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality.) It is instructive to consider the implications of two such attempts.

A classic kind of *anti-realist* expressivist (e.g., Ayer 1936/1952) argues that the expressivist account of thought and talk is inconsistent with positing ethical truths, facts, or properties. Such posits would rest on false presuppositions, on this view. Compare: I say 'Hooray for bears!', thereby expressing my approval of our ursine cousins. It would betray confusion for you to say: 'Is that a fact?'. This question would rest on an obviously false presupposition. The question of mind-dependence purports to concern ethical facts. Far from being a central metaethical question, this question thus likewise rests on a false presupposition, according to the anti-realist expressivist.

Consider next one form of *quasi-realism*, which explains our entitlement to utter claims about facts, mind-independence, and the like by appealing to minimalist theories of locutions like 'fact' and 'mind-independent'. On such theories, the meaning of these expressions is exhausted by certain equivalence schemas. For example, the meaning of 'It is a mind-independent fact that it is wrong to eat bears' might be claimed to be roughly equivalent to that of 'Hooray for not eating bears, whatever anyone thinks about doing so!'. (We say 'roughly' because the meaning of the two sentences cannot be exactly equivalent; the first sentence has compositional properties the second lacks.) Importantly, on this view, the latter sentence is the more explanatorily illuminating of the two. So on this view, the question of mind-independence simply does not arise at the level on which we aim to explain how ethical thought and talk—and what (if anything) such thought and talk is distinctively about—fits into reality. Rather, on this kind of quasi-realism, 'mind-dependence' or 'mind-independence' can be understood as shorthand ways of describing the *modal* structure of certain patterns of substantive ethical commitment. In short, the issue is whether to say things like 'Hooray for  $\phi$ -ing, whatever anyone thinks about  $\phi$ -ing' (see Terence Cuneo's chapter "Quasi-realism" for discussion). Many quasi-realist expressivists are drawn to their view in part *because* it gives them the resources to endorse mind-independence, which they take to be an attractive substantive ethical position on independent grounds. But it might well be that this is a mistaken substantive ethical commitment on their part, and that quasi-realists should endorse mind-dependence instead. (For discussion, see Street 2011.)

These examples show that the thesis of mind-dependence is a central element of some metaethical theories (such as Simple Subjectivism), rests on a false presupposition according to others (such as anti-realist expressivism), and is better understood as a substantive ethical claim according to others (such as one prominent form of quasi-realist expressivism). In light of this, there are many contexts where it will make sense to count mind-dependence as a metaethical issue (hence our including a chapter on it in this volume), but there are other contexts where this could be unproductive or misleading.

Our general point about metaethical claims can also be illustrated by considering philosophical theses and issues that, by themselves, seemingly have little to do with ethics. For example, consider issues about the semantics of conditionals, or about real definition. On our view, tackling such issues might be crucial to certain research programs in metaethics, and irrelevant to others. Understanding the semantic properties of conditionals might be crucial to assessing the Frege-Geach problem for expressivism (see Jack Woods' chapter "The Frege-Geach Problem"). And understanding real definition might be crucial to assessing certain forms of realism (see Gideon Rosen's chapter "Metaphysical Relations in Metaethics"). It seems to us unproductive to try to settle in a context-independent way whether claims about conditionals or about real definition are 'metaethical' or not.

This point also applies to the way we introduced the theoretical activity of metaethics at the start of this chapter. We introduced this activity by connecting it to a specific group of questions which we claimed were theoretically unified—at least in many contexts. The argument of the current section explains why we said 'many' rather than 'all'. As we have been emphasizing, there are different relations that claims, questions, etc. can stand in to the theoretical activity of metaethics. In different contexts, different such relations will be relevant/salient, such that it will be sensible to categorize a different range of questions as 'metaethical'.

These points help to underscore why it is most illuminating to put the characteristic explanatory activity at the center of our understanding of metaethics. There is no principled limit to the sorts of issues that might be central to some or another metaethical research program. This includes traditionally philosophical issues, but also issues in other fields, such as anthropology, sociology, cognitive science, linguistics, and psychology. In some contexts, it might be useful to pick out certain core issues that are pressing for many different promising contemporary attempts to carry out the metaethical project, and label these 'central metaethical issues.' But there is nothing particularly deep about this: in other contexts, it will be important to expand or contract that list in order to focus on those issues that will help us make progress on the metaethical project.

The context-sensitivity we have argued for here applies naturally to questions as well as claims. This is why, in the chapter's initial discussion in the section "The Proposal," we clarified that our claim about the unity of the Group 3 questions was context-sensitive. We there argued that it makes sense to group together certain questions because of their relationship to the theoretical activity of metaethics. This grouping will indeed be sensible across many contexts, because in those contexts, addressing these questions will be relevant to engaging in that activity. However, the lesson of the current section is that there may be some contexts where it would make sense to categorize some of those questions differently.

### **Ethics, Morality, and Robust Normativity**

Our gloss on metaethics characterizes it as an explanatory project concerning actual *ethical* thought, talk, and reality. However, self-described metaethical practice has a variety of explanatory targets, so in this section, we return to this issue in more detail. (Readers of this volume will notice that the volume as a whole varies a lot on this front, with some chapters focused more broadly on the normative and others more narrowly on the

moral.) We take metaethics to concern *ethical* thought, talk, and reality. Roughly, *ethical* questions concern *how to live or act*. The purview of ethics is thus—at least at first blush—broader than that of *morality*. For example, one might engage in extended and careful deliberation in choosing between two professions that one takes to be equally morally acceptable, or one might wonder what color socks to wear to work today. These are questions about *what to do*, but not moral questions in any obvious sense. (For further discussion, see Stephen Darwall’s chapter “Ethics and Morality.”)

It is common to distinguish between two branches of the normative: the *evaluative* and the *deontic* (which is also sometimes called ‘the narrowly normative’). For example, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are paradigmatic evaluative terms, while ‘ought’ and ‘should’ and ‘permissible’ are paradigmatic deontic terms. And there are other normative categories, such as the reason relation, which do not fit neatly into either group. We take the ethical/moral distinction to cross-cut all of these distinctions. For example, it might be that in the first scenario imagined in the preceding paragraph, one has most *ethical* reason but not most *moral* reason to choose one profession over the other. Perhaps this is because considerations of prudence or self-interest favor the first profession in a way that matters for ethical reasoning about what to do, but that doesn’t matter to the morality of that decision.

We think it is important to distinguish metaethics from the related metamoral project for several reasons. The first is that what is a plausible explanation of how *one* kind of thought, talk, and reality fits in with the rest of reality might well not be a good explanation of how *another*, different kind does. In short, the differences between the two kinds of thought, talk, and reality might well make it the case that one kind of explanatory account is suitable for one of them but not the other. This is reflected in the fact that many philosophers have different kinds of views in metaethics than they do in metamorality. For example, some philosophers have found error theory plausible concerning morality, but less so with respect to ethics (as well as vice versa).

Second, because authors are not always clear about their explanatory targets, pressing these distinctions can also help to produce useful interpretive clarification and to locate substantive disagreements. For example, when two philosophers each advance views about how to best explain what they each call ‘moral’ thought, talk, and reality, when are those rival explanations of the *same* part of thought, talk, and reality vs. when are they talking about different things, based on different meanings of the term ‘moral’? And when one philosopher puts forward a view on how to explain *ethical* thought, talk, and reality, when is that in conflict with the explanation that another philosopher puts forward about *moral* thought, talk, and reality, and when is it not?

A third reason to attend to this distinction is that the relationship between the ethical and moral in ordinary thought and talk is messy; for example, ‘unethical’ has very similar connotations to ‘immoral’. Focusing clearly on the distinction may help highlight the need for our theories to regiment ordinary use of such terms.

Another way that certain relations between the ethical and other normative categories could be important to the metaethical project is illustrated by one gloss on the thesis of *Moral Rationalism*:

**Moral Rationalism:** Necessarily, if someone morally ought to perform an action, she also ethically ought to perform it.

If true, Moral Rationalism would potentially entail that the correct metamoral and metaethical theories would have to be closely connected to each other, in order to yield (or at least permit) this tight relationship between ethics and morality. And this could, in turn, provide an interesting constraint on one's theorizing in these domains.

While the relation between ethics and morality is perhaps especially salient in the context of thinking about metaethics, similar connections are possible between metaethics and (e.g.,) the metaepistemic, metapolitical, metaaesthetic, and metalegal projects. As we understand them, these projects have parallel explanatory ambitions for (at least apparently) different parts of thought, talk, and reality (for the metalegal project, see Plunkett and Shapiro forthcoming). It might turn out that there are important explanatory connections between these projects, or even that a certain domain of thought, talk, and reality turns out to be a subset of another. For example, one elegant explanation of Moral Rationalism is that moral considerations are a (distinctively weighty) subset of the ethical considerations (Smith 1994, chapter 6).

Theorizing about the relations between metaethics and these parallel projects is complicated by the fact that—as with the 'ethical' and the 'moral'—there can be central controversies about how to demarcate the parts of thought and talk that are the targets of metaepistemic, metaaesthetic, and metalegal explanation. For example, it is possible to understand *epistemic* thought and talk as encompassing the *full range* of normative thought and talk about how to regulate our beliefs. However, the epistemic is often understood more narrowly, as a subset of such thought and talk that is connected in one or another specific way to *truth*.

It has also become common to talk about the *metanormative* project. Here we take it to be important to distinguish two different explanatory targets (or at least what *prima facie* seem to be two different targets). Consider the rules scrawled on the wall of little Alice's treehouse, or the standards of excellence qua berserker. Alice's dad may break the former rules by entering the treehouse to bring blankets and a snack at the wrong time of day, and Olaf may depart from the latter standards by trying to find a peaceful resolution with his erstwhile enemy. These actions involve violation or departure from the mentioned norms. However, the two norms just mentioned appear to lack the normative authority that we often associate with the norms in ethics and epistemology. These examples motivate distinguishing two 'metanormative' projects. One project might seek to provide a maximally *general* explanatory account, which applies to all normative thought, talk, and reality, including those relating to treehouse rules and berserker norms. Another project might seek to abstract from debates about specific contents (morality, ethics, epistemology, etc.), and to provide an account of that thought, talk, and reality that is 'genuinely' or 'authoritatively' or 'robustly' normative, or that has 'real normative force' (for discussion, see Derek Baker's chapter "The Varieties of Normativity"). We will call these two projects the *broad* and *narrow* metanormative projects, respectively. (For connected discussion, see Plunkett and Shapiro forthcoming.)

Much current work that is self-described as metaethics is best understood as engaging in the narrow metanormative project. For reasons already explored, we think it is important to distinguish these projects. However, it is widely assumed that ethics is authoritatively normative, and thus a subset of the narrow metanormative project. This suggests at least three reasons why it may be important for metaethicists to explore both the narrow metanormative project and the relationship between the ethical and the authoritatively normative.



First, the narrow project invites us to foreground a very interesting question: does the fundamental explanation of the distinctive character of authoritative normativity take place at the level of *thought and talk*, or at the *object-level* (e.g., the level of facts, properties, and relations)? Certain metanormative views invite specific answers to this question. For example, one gloss on Allan Gibbard's views in *Thinking How to Live* (2003) would suggest that authoritatively normative thought is distinctive in directly involving *planning* about what to do, think, or feel, and directly involving a distinctive set of concepts involved in such planning. A non-naturalist realist might, by contrast, suggest that authoritative normativity is first and foremost located in *sui generis* normative properties. On this view, normative thought and talk is *derivatively* authoritative, in virtue of being *about* those properties. If the ethical is authoritatively normative, adjudicating this debate will have significant implications for our metaethical theorizing.

Second, suppose that commitment to authoritative normativity is built into ethical thought and talk. In this case, arguing against the existence of authoritative normativity would be a clear way to develop a *metaethical* error theory.

Third, explicit focus on the narrow metanormative project might be important for metaethics because the narrow project might reveal that there is no single thing that is normative authority. As Philippa Foot (1972) showed, certain features like *categorical applicability*, that have sometimes been taken to be marks of authoritative normativity, are in fact much more widespread. And attempts to informatively characterize normative authority often either traffic in metaphors or descend rapidly into circularity (cf. Copp 2005, Tiffany 2007 and Baker forthcoming). The intuitive contrast with (e.g.) Alice's treehouse norms does not silence these worries. For it could be that talk of normative authority can track a multiplicity of features in different contexts, perhaps including certain connections to speaker endorsement, agent motivation, third-party emotions, religious traditions, etc.

## COMPETITORS, CHALLENGES, AND COMPLICATIONS

So far, we have sought to explain our proposed characterization of metaethics and identify some of the implications of the proposal. In this section, we situate our proposal in relation to several other well-known proposals in order to highlight several virtues of our account. We then explain how our account sheds light on a range of important worries about metaethics.

### Situating our Proposal

The account of metaethics that we offer here is novel and controversial. In this section, we briefly survey some salient competitors. In doing so, we aim to explain how we can accommodate what is illuminating in these accounts, and to emphasize the comparative virtues of our account. Many of the proposals that we will discuss have a common pair of features: they can function as a useful provisional orientation to the field, but it is difficult to see how they could be developed into an account that explains the unity of metaethics.

We might begin by considering an analogy: metaethics relates to normative and applied ethics as the philosophy of science relates to science, or the philosophy of math relates to math. There are attractive parallels here. For example, the task of explaining how *mathematical* thought, talk, and what (if anything) it is distinctively about, fits in with reality is at least a central part of the philosophy of math. Moreover, just as inquiry *within* ethics has different constitutive standards of success than inquiry within metaethics, so too the standards of success differ between mathematics and the philosophy of math. This analogy is thus potentially illuminating in at least these respects. However, the usefulness of the analogy is limited. This analogy is not yet a theory of metaethics. We could develop a theory by proposing that just as the philosophy of math is philosophical inquiry into mathematics, metaethics is philosophical inquiry into ethics. But while the former is a plausible gloss on the philosophy of math, the latter is not a plausible characterization of metaethics. Questions in normative and applied ethics are paradigmatic philosophical questions about ethics. And this does nothing to suggest that they are metaethical.

A second gloss is tailor-made to address this concern. According to this gloss, normative and applied ethics ask *first-order* questions about ethics, such as ‘What ought I to do?’ Metaethics, by contrast, asks *second-order* questions about ethics, such as ‘What does it mean to ask “What ought I to do?”’ (Smith 1994, 2; Miller 2013, 1). Again, this can be a useful means of getting a grip on metaethics, but it is hard to see how it explains the unity of metaethics. Consider the questions ‘Are there any ethical facts?’ and ‘How many people are wondering “what ought I to do?” right now?’. In many contexts it will make sense to treat the first question as metaethical, despite its not obviously being second-order. And it rarely makes sense to treat the second question as metaethical, despite its manifestly being second order.

According to a third common gloss, metaethics is about the *nature* of ethics (e.g., Kagan 1998; van Roojen 2015, 1). One might interpret this as suggesting that metaethics concerns the very abstract or general or deep claims about what ethics is. While this may describe many claims that play a central role in the metaethical project, we think the account is arguably both too broad and too narrow. It is arguably too broad because many claims within normative ethics are candidates to be deep and general facts about what ethics is. For example, the thesis that everyone should always promote the good—if it were true—would be a profound and general fact about the nature of ethics. And (at least in many contexts—see the section “Metaethics as an Activity, and Metaethical Claims,” above) it will make sense *not* to count this as a metaethical claim. Conversely (as we emphasized in the section “‘Metaethics’ as a Theoretical Term”), we think metaethical theorizing need not always be abstract or general or deep. An attempt to develop an extensionally adequate semantics for a specific ethical word like ‘honorable’ (e.g.) might play an important role in the metaethical project, even if it did not shed significant light on the nature of ethics in general. Another worry is that this gloss could be actively misleading: many philosophers will hear ‘nature of’ talk as pointing to a specific set of *meta-physical* issues, and that reading would make this gloss controversial indeed, in virtue of excluding issues about ethical thought and talk.

One might amend the gloss in light of these worries to say that metaethics concerns the nature of ethical thought, talk, and reality. This makes the account very similar to ours: it differs by substituting ‘nature of’ talk for our emphasis on explanation and fitting in. We think

our gloss is more illuminating in virtue of this contrast. For example, our gloss can explain why the epistemology of ethics is a central part of the metaethical project: epistemological connections are one central dimension of *fit* between ethical thought and ethical reality. Our gloss is also more methodologically informative. For example, accounts of the semantics of ethical terms do not develop in a vacuum; rather, they are almost always developed against a backdrop of broader assumptions of how semantics can and does work for a range of expressions. This pattern is ubiquitous. For example, the metaphysics of ethics is deeply informed and constrained by broader metaphysical debates and assumptions. In short, an account that did not illuminate how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality would, we claim, fail to address many of the central concerns that drive contemporary theorizing about the paradigm questions in Group 3, with which we introduced metaethics.

A fourth common gloss—sometimes paired with one of the ideas above—characterizes metaethics as a collection of philosophical subareas, such as the semantics, psychology, metaphysics, and epistemology of ethics. We agree that metaethical theories have often focused on parts of these familiar subareas of philosophy. However, the gloss fails to illuminate either what distinguishes metaethics from normative ethics, or what unifies metaethics itself. The first point is illustrated by the fact that according to many metaethical views, ordinary *ethical* claims are metaphysical claims. For example, consider the consequentialist ethical claim that actions are right in virtue of the goodness of their consequences. Many realist metaethical theories would entail that this claim should be interpreted as a claim about the metaphysics of ethics, namely that facts about the rightness of actions are grounded in facts about the goodness of their consequences. (For connected discussion, see Berker forthcoming.) Glossing metaethics in terms of these familiar subareas of philosophy thus threatens to obscure the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics. The second point is a characteristic of the list-style view: this view does nothing to explain why we should group the semantics, psychology, metaphysics, and epistemology of ethics together. Why do these subareas constitute a unified area of inquiry? This issue is particularly pressing, given that different areas tend to show up on different lists of what characterizes metaethics. For example, deontic logic shows up on some (e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, 6), and moral responsibility shows up on others (e.g., Sayre-McCord 2014).

By contrast, our account does two important things. First, it makes clear why it at least often makes sense for those engaged in metaethical inquiry to work on the familiar subareas mentioned above. The reason is that work in these subareas is frequently an essential element of proposed (partial) attempts to meet the constitutive aim of metaethics. (This was illustrated by the natural progression from one sort of question to another in our discussion of Simple Subjectivism, and by our discussion of metaethical research programs in the section “Metaethics as an Activity, and Metaethical Claims.”) Second, because our view does not explain the unity of metaethics in terms of a specific list of types of claims, it can explain why it might be appropriate to count claims about deontic logic among metaethical claims in one context, and claims about moral responsibility among metaethical claims in another.

Finally, consider a *very* traditional gloss on metaethics. This understands metaethics as the philosophical study of ethical language (e.g., Hudson 1970, 1). This proposal has the virtue of making the field of metaethics *more* unified than it is on our characterization: *ethical language* appears to be a recognizably unified target. This pro-

posal, however, comes at a high cost. For example, it would entail that David Enoch's *Taking Morality Seriously* (2011)—a paradigmatic contemporary work of systematic metaethics—contains little metaethics, since Enoch's book focuses largely on metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological issues. Further, there is a ready explanation of what has gone wrong in the language-centric gloss. As Gilbert Harman (1977, viii) notes, philosophers began to conceive of metaethics as a distinctive area of philosophy inquiry within a socially/historically specific philosophical context in which linguistic analysis was widely assumed to be the uniquely legitimate philosophical methodology. The language-centric gloss is thus well understood as building those methodological assumptions into its characterization of what metaethics is trying to achieve. Our account permits us to vindicate the plausible idea that contemporary metaethicists are engaged in the *same* broad project as the canonical works of G. E. Moore (1903) and A. J. Ayer (1936, chapter 6). This is to explain how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. While contemporary metaethicists are engaged in this same broad project, their execution of that project is informed by a century of intellectual developments both within and outside of philosophy.

If we shift focus from the past to the future, we can see that this feature of our account is an advantage over any account that characterizes metaethics in terms of a specific list of types of claims or questions. Given the nature of the metaethical project as we understand it, and optimism about philosophical progress, we should expect the intellectual context that informs metaethical theorizing to continue to evolve and progress. This progress may lead philosophers aiming to explain how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality to focus on claims and questions that current metaethical practice ignores. Unlike any account of metaethics that privileges a static list of claims or questions, our account allows us to understand this development as progress in the same activity—metaethics—that we are currently pursuing with less knowledge and poorer tools.

### Challenges and Complications

Several prominent philosophers have worried or argued that there is something problematic about metaethics, or something problematic about the idea that there is a distinction between metaethics and normative ethics. Some worry that metaethical inquiry presupposes distinctions that cannot be sustained. Others think that metaethical theorizing renders certain important ways of theorizing about ethics invisible. And still others think that certain general philosophical theses entail that metaethics and normative ethics are not distinct. We will explain how our understanding of metaethics helps address these worries. We conclude this section by explaining two related concerns about metaethical practice that our theory does not preclude.

Begin with the suspicion about the theoretical interest of a distinction between normative ethics and metaethics. We have offered a preliminary reply to this suspicion: as we pointed out in the introduction, paradigmatic metaethical questions seem *different* from paradigmatic question in normative or applied ethics. And our account offers a vindicating explanation for this contrast, proposing that metaethical inquiry is interestingly unified by aims that are distinct from those of normative ethical inquiry.

It is a consequence of our view that metaethics is *not* constitutively about trying to make progress within normative or applied ethics. In light of this, metaethical inquiry

could *conceivably* be wholly successful as such without enabling progress in ethical theorizing. However, our account of metaethics is also compatible with the opposite possibility: that the projects of metaethics and normative ethics interact in significant ways, such that the best methodology for doing metaethics involves doing normative ethics, and vice versa (for discussion, see Darwall 1998 and McPherson 2012). Briefly consider two ways of motivating this connection. First, a metaethical theory can directly entail the answer to some normative ethical questions. For example, a metaethical theory that included a reductive theory of what one ought to do might entail a maximally general account of which acts we ought to perform. More subtly, a metaethical theory might have important implications for the evidence that we should appeal to in doing normative ethics. For example, consider Richard Boyd's influential version of naturalistic moral realism (as in Boyd 1997), according to which moral kind terms refer directly to the clusters of properties that causally regulate our use of those terms. This account casts doubt on the reliability of intuitive moral judgments about unrealistic cases (McPherson 2012, 539–540). Many of the considerations that Boyd appeals to in his argument would support very similar conclusions about the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics (as opposed to morality, more narrowly construed). This is significant because appeals to such cases drive much of the most influential work in normative ethics (e.g., Parfit 1984, Thomson 1990, and Kamm 2007). We aim here only to illustrate such possible connections between metaethics and normative ethics. Our account of metaethics is itself neutral concerning the methodological significance of such connections.

Christine Korsgaard (e.g., 1996, 2003, and 2009) argues that ethical thinking and reasoning are inherently practical: they have their most fundamental home in the context of first-person deliberation about what to do, where this—at least initially—contrasts with theoretical reasoning about what to believe. It is crucial to Korsgaard that deliberation is irreducible to theoretical reasoning, and deploys its own concepts. To simplify greatly, Korsgaard argues that the metaethical project presupposes an incorrect picture of deliberation, which gives theoretical reason a misleading explanatory primacy. (For a more detailed discussion, see Melissa Barry's chapter "Constructivism.") However, our gloss on the metaethical project is compatible with giving the practical perspective a range of sorts of primacy. It is compatible, for example, with the thesis that if the norms of practical and theoretical reason deliver different verdicts concerning how to fit ethical thought, talk, and reality into reality, we are committed qua agents to accepting the verdict of practical reason. It is also compatible with the different idea that the explanatory project of fitting ethical thought, talk, and reality into reality can only be accomplished from within the deliberative perspective. We don't find such hypotheses attractive, but debating them is a matter of substantive metaethical theorizing and is hence fully compatible with the metaethical project as we understand it.

Ronald Dworkin (1996 and 2011) argues that many apparently metaethical claims have normative ethical implications. He then uses this fact to argue that it is difficult to interpret the apparently metaethical claims as anything other than normative ethical claims. Our account gives us the resources to provide a clear reply to this challenge. Dworkin appears to assume that ethics is *autonomous* in the sense that ethical claims are, in principle, not derivable from non-ethical claims, including metaethical claims. (For discussion, see Barry Maguire's chapter "The Autonomy of Ethics.") Notice that the claim that ethics is autonomous is plausibly a (negative) claim about how ethical

thought, talk, or reality fit in with reality. In light of this, on our account, the claim that ethics is autonomous is itself a claim that will often be made *within* an attempt to carry out the overall metaethical project. Many candidate metaethical theories have implications inconsistent with the autonomy of ethics. If ethics is autonomous, these views are ipso facto false. But this possibility would threaten neither the status of these theories as metaethical nor the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics (cf. McPherson 2008; for a view of the relationship between metaethics and normative ethics compatible with these claims, see Mark Schroeder's chapter "Normative Ethics and Metaethics.")

Selim Berker (forthcoming) argues that the same metaphysical dependence relation is expressed by normative grounding claims (like 'Henry should give the bicycle to Claire in virtue of the fact that he promised he would') as are expressed by metaphysical grounding claims (like 'A glass is fragile in virtue of the structure of the molecules that make it up'). Berker notes that much of normative ethics involves explanatory claims like the former. He concludes from this that large parts of normative ethics concern (part of) the metaphysical structure of ethics, which is just a part of metaethics. Berker suggests that this casts doubt on the idea that there is a theoretically important cut between metaethics and normative ethics.

As we emphasized in the section "Metaethics as an Activity, and Metaethical Claims," we take the metaethical *project* to be more basic than the idea of a metaethical *claim*. This provides the basis for a reply to both Dworkin and Berker. Given our project-first account, even if many *claims* feature centrally in both the metaethical and normative ethical projects, this does nothing to undermine the distinct nature of the *projects* themselves. To illustrate, consider an explanatory form of consequentialism according to which one ought to perform an action *in virtue of* its promoting optimal consequences. Is that a normative ethical claim? Or a metaethical one? Some might think that is *obviously* a normative ethical claim, and *obviously not* a metaethical one. On our view, this form of consequentialism is clearly apt to play a role in normative ethics: it is a candidate partial explanation of what one ought to do. However, consequentialism might *also* play a crucial role in certain metaethical theories, for example as part of the explanation of how ethical reality fits in with the rest of reality. As with the issue of mind-dependence, however, this will only be true of *some* attempts to make progress within the metaethical project. For other attempts—such as those which deploy the kind of quasi-realism mentioned in the section "Metaethics as an Activity, and Metaethical Claims"—consequentialism will not be apt to play a central role in metaethical explanations. To reiterate the main point: a single claim can play an actual or a potential role in various different explanatory projects. Once we understand metaethics and normative ethics as projects, this sort of potential for overlap becomes predictable and innocuous.

So far, in this section, we have argued that our account of metaethics can help answer some prominent anxieties about the metaethical project. However, it is worth emphasizing that the points we have made are compatible with profound suspicions about the metaethical project, and how that project is currently practiced. Consider two illustrative worries.

First, one might worry that existing metaethical practice overwhelmingly uses the wrong tools or makes incorrect presuppositions. To offer just one example, much metaethical work is structured by the deployment of folk psychological categories, which in turn are examined using armchair methods. Many philosophers are suspicious of the

value of such methods for providing an explanatory account of ethical thought and talk. This worry is wholly compatible with the theoretical goal we claim to characterize metaethical inquiry. The worry can prompt its bearer to bring her preferred tools to bear on this goal.

Second, one might worry that, on our characterization of metaethics, there are strong reasons to abandon the metaethical project. For example, one might worry that the ostensible target of metaethical inquiry—actual existing ethical thought, talk, and what (if anything) it is distinctively about—is theoretically uninteresting, ideologically suspect, or just an unsalvageable mess. As we noted above, we think that the project determining what to *replace* actual existing ethical thought and talk with—or how to reform it to make it better—is a very different project from metaethics, given how we have described the latter. Because of this, we think that this second sort of worry is well described as a worry about the metaethical project *per se*, and not (as with the first worry) simply about how that project is currently executed.

As we noted earlier, our characterization of ‘metaethics’ as a theoretical term rests in part upon the idea that metaethics is *an* important theoretical activity. However, as we also emphasized above, our aims in this introductory chapter are clarificatory, and not evaluative. While we are in fact both enthusiastic proponents of the metaethical project, we take it to be a virtue of our account that it permits us to aptly characterize and take seriously wholesale doubts about that project or its current execution, as we have just done.

## CONCLUSION

In this conclusion, we do two things. First, we summarize some of the virtues of our account of metaethics. Second, we briefly explain the consequences of our conception of metaethics for a natural question: Why, if at all, does metaethics *matter*?

This introductory chapter has argued for the following conception of metaethics, and showed how this conception can be illuminating:

**Metaethics:** Metaethics is that theoretical activity which aims to explain how actual ethical thought and talk—and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about—fits into reality.

One virtue of this account is that it explains the theoretically interesting unity of metaethical inquiry. On our account, such inquiry is unified by a theoretically interesting *explanatory aim*. We used the example of Simple Subjectivism to illustrate how linguistic, psychological, metaphysical, and epistemological claims can all play a crucial and natural role in addressing this explanatory aim.

Another virtue of our account is that it is informative enough to permit a clear statement of substantive challenges to the significance of metaethical inquiry.

Our account takes metaethical inquiry to be explanatorily basic, and the meaning of ‘metaethical claim’ to be both explanatorily non-basic and context-sensitive. This has two important payoffs. First, our account accommodates the fact that it can make sense to discuss certain claims as ‘metaethical’ ones in certain contexts, but not in others. For example, consider again the claim that we earlier labeled *mind-dependence* (i.e., the claim

that the fundamental ethical facts are dependent on our mental states). As we showed in the section “Metaethics as an Activity, and Metaethical Claims,” it makes sense to treat the thesis of mind-dependence as a metaethical claim in many contexts involving discussion of Simple Subjectivism (given that mind-dependence is part of that metaethical theory), but as a substantive ethical claim in many contexts involving discussion of quasi-realist expressivism (given the neutrality of quasi-realist expressivism with respect to this claim, and its interpretation of what this claim amounts to). Second, our view can explain what is continuous in metaethical inquiry across a history of marked changes in prevailing conceptions of the important questions, live options, resources, and liabilities within metaethics.

Some people think that metaethics *matters* in ways that many other parts of philosophy do not. For example, Derek Parfit (2011) famously worries that many salient metaethical views have the consequence that his life doesn’t matter. Parfit found this possibility distressing, and his desire to assess this possibility is central to his motivation for doing metaethics. We suspect that Parfit is wrong to be as worried as he is about the potential truth of certain metaethical views. However, it does seem that he is onto something here about the distinctive import of metaethics. Can our account contribute to vindicating that idea? Put another way: What does our account mean for why (if at all) we should *care* about the metaethical project? Our reply draws on several points that we have made in this chapter. First, ethical thought and talk is a central part of how we guide and understand our lives, including how we understand our lives as somehow *meaningful* ones. Given our gloss on metaethics as an explanatory project, it is reasonable to hope that metaethics could enable us to better understand this important and distinct dimension of our lives. Second, as we have noted, it can seem extremely difficult to understand how ethical thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. One might thus want to know (as Parfit does) whether one’s central assumptions about this subject matter can be sustained upon critical reflection. Third, we have noted in the section “Challenges and Complications” that our account is compatible with the natural—though not universally held—hope that metaethical inquiry could contribute to our making progress in the projects of normative and applied ethics. If it can do this, metaethics might thereby help us better guide our lives.

While we take metaethics to matter in ways such as these, our aim in this introductory chapter is to characterize metaethics, not to defend its significance. Thus—as we emphasized earlier in these conclusions—our account is compatible with the view that we ultimately have reasons to set aside the metaethical project and focus on some alternative project instead.

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