Significance without Substance:

A Defence of Pragmatist Quietism in Meta-Ethics

Andrew Sepielli

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e-mail: Andrew(dot)Sepielli(at)utoronto.ca

Chapter One: Introduction

Ethical inquiry can be in good order, it's reasonable to suppose, only if there exist such things in the world as reasons or values. But ethics isn't the branch of philosophy that explains what exists. Metaphysics is. One might also think that ethical terms must *refer* to those values or reasons. But ethics isn't the systematic study of reference and meaning. That's the philosophy of language. One might also think that ethical inquiry must be capable of delivering *knowledge* of these values or reasons. But it's epistemology that explains how knowledge is possible, not ethics. It's easy, then, to be tempted by a picture on which ethical inquiry can go forward without embarrassment only if and after it receives the "okay" from these other, apparently more fundamental areas. On this picture, ethics seems like "last philosophy".

In recent years, though, more and more meta-ethicists have pushed back against this picture — some because they doubt that ethics incurs all of these commitments, and some because they think that ethical inquiry can make good on them all by itself. These philosophers get called "quietists", "non-foundationalists", or "lightweight moral realists". They think there can be right answers in ethics that are independent of our opinions, but they abjure the need to vindicate these "from the outside" or "from sideways on", *via* metaphysics, semantics, epistemology, or some other extra-ethical domain. Their ranks include Ronald Dworkin (1996), Richard Rorty (1990, 1998), Thomas Nagel (1997), John McDowell (1979), Derek Parfit (2011), Tim Scanlon (2014), Alice Crary (2016), Stanley Cavell (1979), Simon Blackburn (1993), and Matthew Kramer (2009).

Even before we consider the arguments for quietism in detail, it should not be difficult to appreciate the view's seductive power. I think of the audience for this book: Some of you may be practitioners of normative ethics who harbour secret worries that the legitimacy of your inquiry hangs on the results churned out by your colleagues in "M&E" — or, as they used to call it, "core" philosophy.[1] I used to share such worries. Other pictures of the status of ethics in the world do little to quell them. These non-quietist pictures keep you, to some degree or other, in thrall to the metaphysicians and semanticists. The quietist grants you full autonomy.

Some of you may be interested in meta-ethics because you are worried about the threat of nihilism or *anomie* — those socio-psychological cosmic terrors that we might hope to vanquish though a vindication of ethical truth. Well, I think there's a case to be made that quietism promises he surest bulwark against nihilism and *anomie* — not ethical truth with a firm foundation (for a foundation can be reduced to rubble by a clever skeptic), but rather, ethical truth that doesn't *need* a foundation.

Still others of you may be battle-hardened veterans of the meta-ethics wars, mildly curious about what this latest defender of ethical quietism can muster in its defence. Many in this cohort will undoubtedly take the most widely-trafficked reservations about the status of ethics very seriously. But perhaps, like me, you regard most of the standard "problems" in "the literature" as giving poor expression to whatever inchoate concerns you've had about the ethical. In that case, quietism may be appealing insofar as it offers a principled way to dismiss such concerns. For example, much of the meta-ethical literature encourages us to worry about how ethical "properties" may be "placed" amongst the "furniture of the universe", and to think of ethical intuitions as "reaching out to the realm of the forms" or whatever. But really? "Placing"? — as

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[1] It is hard for me to take offence at this, for later on I will argue that ethics, and more broadly, value theory, are "core", or "first philosophy".

though values are puzzle-pieces, extra things or "stuff"? "Reaching out"? — as represented by a "hand-tenna" on your forehead?[2] "*Surely* that's distortive," many will say. "*Surely* it's not like that!"

And yet, for me at least, the seductions of quietism are interrupted by one nagging thought: **If it's "not like that", what *is* it like?** It's all well and good to suggest that some picture of ethics is founded on an error; but then how do things look once all the errors have been identified and cleared away? Is there a broader worldview that hangs together, that makes sense of things generally, within which we might ensconce objective but foundation-less ethical truths? I do not mean an "external", metaphysical cataloguing of what exists, for instance, that includes ethical facts or properties. That would be inconsistent with quietism. Rather, I have in mind a broader framework that explains why we don't *need* such a cataloguing.

I don't believe that any of the aforementioned luminaries, or anyone else for that matter, has provided one. They give us a meta-ethical theory in quietist objectivism that many of us may *want* to accept, but never to my mind satisfactorily explain *how* we can accept it. They leave us short of full understanding, and leave ethics looking uncanny. If they're not promising the impossible, it's not easy to see *how* they're not.

It's striking, too, that some of them barely *try* to offer such a background theory. Parfit sidesteps the metaphysical worries (though not obviously the epistemological and semantic ones) by telling us that, on his version of moral realism, moral features exist only in a "non-ontological" sense, which they do just in case: (a) there are moral truths, but (b) they are "are not made to be true by there being some part of reality to which [they] correspond" (2011, p. 747). He gives us examples of other things that exist in this sense, as well as of things that exist in the ontological sense. And he tells us that existing in the non-ontological sense precludes existing in the spatio-temporal order. But that's it. We're given no answer to apparently legitimate questions like: If these

[2] See some of the later pictures here: http://consc.net/pics/methodology.html.

truths are not made true by corresponding with reality, are they made true at all? How can there be truths without truth-makers? What about morality makes it different from certain other fields in this respect? And we've not even addressed the implications of non-ontological existence for epistemology, reference, and so on.

Scanlon holds that facts within a "domain" — e.g. physics, ethics, math — are "properly settled by the standards of the domain that they are about", at least "insofar as they do not conflict with statements of some other domain" (2014, p. 19). By the standards of ethics, he thinks, there are plenty of objective ethical truths. This proposal gives rise to many objections[3], but more to the present point, Scanlon does not offer anything like an explanation of why the criteria for truth are domain-specific like this, and like Parfit, he says nothing to explain how it's possible for there to be truths in ethics are not grounded in truths that only metaphysics can discover or vindicate. David Enoch and Tristram McPherson thus characterize Scanlon and others like him as offering up a "negative program", on which "[normative] commitments like those just mentioned do not saddle one with ontological commitments that require special defence." But they note that he neglects to offer much in the way of a *"positive…program* that is supposed to provide the underlying interpretive alternative to these putative ontological commitments." (2017, p. 821).

My aim in this book is to provide just such a "positive program" — one that offers an alternative not only to taking on board ontological commitments, but semantic, epistemological, rationality-theoretic ones, too. It is a defence of quietist objectivism that bottoms out in general story about how "things in the broadest sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term".[4] It is "big-picture", but hopefully filled in with enough detail to instil confidence that I'm not promising the impossible. While of course I hope everybody and their dog reads this book, my envisaged readers are those who are in the same position I was in some years ago — turned off by

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[3] See especially McPherson and Enoch (2017) and Wodak (2017).

[4] This characterization of the philosophical enterprise is due to Sellars (1962), p. 35.

many of the standard meta-ethical debates and "problems", attracted to meta-ethical quietism, but unable, even after reading the work of the august thinkers named above, to see how exactly such a view might work. The book is addressed, then, to those have not yet identified as quietist objectivists more for want of an "explanation how" than for want of an "argument that".

An Outline of My View

To a *first approximation*, my view is that fundamental ethical debates are *non-substantive*, and that this explains why ethics neither admits of nor requires vindication from metaphysics, semantics, and the rest. For soon-to-be-obvious reasons, it won't be worth our while to define "non-substantive", but the following examples should give you some idea of what I'm talking about — the dispute William James describes concerning whether a man who is chasing a squirrel around a tree is thereby also going "round the squirrel" (1907, p. 505) (hereafter: Squirrel), and the one Karen Bennett imagines concerning whether "some nonsense made of sour green apple liqueur" in a martini-shaped glass is truly a martini (2009, p. 50) (hereafter: Martini). Because ethical debates are non-substantive, taking sides in them places us in no peril of either misrepresenting the world or acting in ways that generally thwart our desires.

But there is a crucial difference between ethical debates and most other non-substantive debates. Squirrel and Martini are not only not substantive; they are not appreciably *significant* in any way whatsoever. We risk *nothing* of importance in taking positions within them. Hence their tendency to spark reactions like: "Who cares?"; "What difference does it make?"; "You could go either way"; "What's the point?". Ethical debates, while not substantive, are nonetheless significant. They are significant because the stances we take influence what we do and why we do it — and thus whether we do the right things and act for the right reasons. In other words, ethical debates are *ethically* significant, even if they are not significant in the ways that substantive debates are. This specifically ethical significance explains why we ought sometimes to engage in ethical

debates at all — and why we ought to do so rigorously rather than sloppily, open- rather than closed-mindedly, and so on.

Now, of course, many philosophers think that ethics can be, or must be, vindicated from the outside — that ethical views ought to be accepted, revised, or even dropped wholesale on metaphysical, semantic, epistemological, rationality-theoretic or other such grounds. They search for "foundations" for their ethical views in these other areas, and worry about what follows if there are no such foundations. But I will argue that the aforementioned areas of inquiry can generally provide adequate grounds for accepting or rejecting a belief only insofar as they bear on the belief's contribution to the quality of our representations of the world and to the general tendency of our actions to bring about what we desire, whatever exactly it is that we desire. But as I've said above, our ethical beliefs make no such contribution. Therefore, metaphysics, semantics, and the rest — in other words, the pillars of what gets labelled "meta-ethics" — are generally irrelevant to whether we ought to hold an ethical view. All that is generally relevant is the ethical significance of holding that view — the sort of significance that shows up only from within the perspective of first-order normative ethical inquiry.

The end result is a theory on which ethics is, as they say, "autonomous" — neither capable of nor in need of being legitimated from the outside. In other words, it is a form of ethical quietism.

Recall, though, that this book is billed as a defence not just of quietism, but more specifically of objectivist quietism. So why "objectivist"? Well, I call any view "objectivist" if it holds that right and wrong are, in the relevant way, fundamentally independent of anyone's ethical attitudes. I regard objectivism so understood as a thesis in first-order normative ethics, on a par with the view that right and wrong are fundamentally independent of the agent's intentions, or independent of the law, or independent of desire-fulfillment. And I will argue that ethical objectivism, like any other thesis in first-order normative ethics, ought to be accepted just insofar

as it is ethically good to do so. I contend that it is ethically good to accept ethical objectivism. So that is why my view gets the label "Objectivist Quietism".

The non-substantivity of ethical disputes also helps to explain why ethics displays so many signs and symptoms of *not* being objective. This will be useful in our battle against non-objectivist views of ethics. For it seems to me that such views get much of their appeal from the easy explanation they can offer of why there seems to be, as Gilbert Harman (1977) put it, a "problem with ethics". Their explanation is simply that reality matches appearance — ethics looks to be a realm of opinion or illusion because it *is* a realm of opinion or illusion. But if the account I offer in this book is successful, we will have taken the wind out of the anti-objectivist's sails. We'll not only have a positive argument that ethics is objective; we'll also have an explanation of why it can sometimes seem not to be.

But as I said, that was all just a *first approximation*. Let me now take you through a *second* approximation. A major problem with the story above is that some ethical inquiry *does* seem to have the sort of influence on our ability to navigate and represent the world that we associate with substantivity. I'm thinking in particular of the kind of inquiry suggested by the examples from Nicholas Sturgeon's classic paper "Moral Explanations" (1984). Sturgeon, recall, was replying to Harman's (1977) claim that we can't confirm the existence of moral facts because such facts don't help to explain why we hold the moral views we do; this is because they don't help to explain *anything*. As one element in his reply, Sturgeon adduces some examples of plausible moral explanations. The most notable one is drawn from the work of historian Bernard DeVoto, who attributes the failure to save the Donner Party in 1847 partly to the fact that the leader of one of the rescue teams, Selim Woodworth, was "no damned good" (1984, p. 244). Of course, if indeed Woodworth was a bad guy, that was in virtue of subvening facts about his psychology, behaviour, and so on. But it is implausible, Sturgeon argues, not to mention inconsistent with the practices of

most of the successful sciences, to deny the explanatory significance of facts or entities solely on the grounds that they are supervenient.

The question of Woodworth's character, posed in the context that Sturgeon is imagining, looks substantive, then — just like questions about Woodworth's bone density or military service record. And so rather than saying that *all* ethical debate and inquiry is non-substantive, I would rather say that some is and some isn't. The kind of ethical inquiry to which Sturgeon was adverting is substantive, but the kind of inquiry that we tend to call "moral philosophy" or "pure ethical inquiry" — and I'd say, the kind to which *Harman* was implicitly adverting — is importantly different, and non-substantive.

But what exactly is the difference between inquiry in "Sturgeon cases" and paradigmatic "moral philosophy" that explains why the former are substantive but the latter are not? I claim it's that former are what I call "deep", while the latter are what I call "superficial". The deep/superficial distinction is not a metaphysical, semantic, or otherwise philosophical one. It is a *psychological* distinction. Specifically: The conclusions we form pursuant to deep debate and inquiry have effects on our other beliefs, our non-conceptual representational states, and our actions that those we form pursuant to superficial debate and inquiry do not. Much of the first half of the book will be devoted to unpacking this distinction and then using it to explain how — again, to a *second approximation* — the kind of inquiry we tend to call "moral philosophy" is non-substantive, and as such, resistant to incursions from the realms of metaphysics, semantics, and so on. I will also have something to say about the bearing of *deep* ethical debates on the fortunes of quietist objectivism.

While I've been couching my view so far in terms of substantivity, keep in mind that the foregoing were simply first and second approximations. The story I *really* want to tell dispenses with this notion, and focuses instead on the *values* that are often taken to be bound up with substantivity and related notions like truth. These are the kinds of values the conspicuous absence

of which we're noting when we say of debates like Squirrel and Martini that "they don't matter" and "you could go either way", or ask of them "Who cares?" or "What difference does it make?". They are what I call "Predictive value", "General Practical Value", and "Representational Value". I apply to all of these the label of "Truthy" values (not to be confused with *truth* values!).

I will argue that the sorts of ethical debates I'm concerned with — i.e. what I labelled the "superficial" ones — afford none of these "truthy" values. I'll further argue that metaphysical, semantic, and epistemological considerations can *generally* bear on whether to adopt a view only insofar as they bear on the Predictive, General Practical, or Representational value that one might gain or lose by adopting that view. But since none of these values can be gained or lost in superficial debates, these extra-ethical considerations cannot be relevant to which ethical views to adopt. The only values that can be relevant are what I've called "Specifically Ethical" ones. And these, as I said before, support *not* dropping our ethical beliefs wholesale — and what's more, accepting an objectivist view of ethics.

Why frame things in terms of these types of values — "Truthy" and "Specifically Ethical" — rather than couching my view in terms of substantivity as I've been doing so far? Well, most obviously, going the "substantivity" route would seem to prevent me from reaching the conclusion I want — that there are objectively right answers in ethics. It would seem to do this in two ways. First, if the ethical debates in question (i.e. the superficial ones) are non-substantive, then it seems that, just by the definition of "non-substantive", they cannot have objectively right answers. Second, there lurks a "self-underminingness" worry of the sort that may be familiar from the debates about the "verification criterion of meaning" and such: Debates *about substantivity itself* are, on my accounting, superficial. But this would seem to make *them* non-substantive, and for that reason, incapable of having either correct or incorrect answers.

Proceeding in terms of values, rather than substantivity, helps us get to the conclusion we want. Things can be good in some ways without being good in others. A basketball player can be a

terrific passer but a terrible shooter. A civilization may grow progressively fairer, but less conducive to great achievements. And a belief can be good in its office as a guide to action without serving as a "mirror of nature". There can be Specifically Ethical value in forming some ethical belief pursuant to superficial inquiry even if there is no Representational Value, or General Practical Value, or Predictive Value, in doing so. So I will argue.

But here is where thing might start to look dodgy. My task was to explain the status of values in the world. Specifically, I aimed to explain how there could be right "ways to go" in ethics that did not generally depend on the metaphysics of moral properties, the sense or reference of moral terms, and so on. But as you see, my explanation bottoms out in claims *about values*. I'm getting the general irrelevance of metaphysics, etc., *via* the claim that superficial ethical disputes afford no Truthy values. And I'm getting the existence of correct "ways to go" in such disputes by adverting to Specifically Ethical values. But this just prompts the same questions all over again. Do I now say that debates about all of *these* values are non-substantive? That's just disaster delayed. Do we tell some other story — one that brings back in metaphysics, the referent of "good", or some such? Well, no, I wouldn't want to go that route either.

Rather, I will say this: Everyone's explanations have to give out *somewhere*; everyone is saddled with some degree of bruteness in their theory — as I try to make clear later on, in Chapter 5. The task from an explanatory point-of-view is to try to reduce bruteness as much as possible. I do this by turning what may seem like a dangling *explanandum* into the *explanans*. Rather than offer a general, fundamental view about what there is, or what's true, that makes room for values amongst tables, interest rates, and feelings, I offer a general, fundamental theory of value that explains the goodness of accepting beliefs across-the-board — about values, interest rates, feelings, tables, you-name-it. In other words, I treat considerations of value are methodologically prior to

considerations of fact. The name of this approach was once famously called "new"[5] but is by now old: pragmatism. (Of course I recognize that people use "pragmatism" to mean lots of different things. I think mine is the most interesting of these things, but it's not worth fighting over terminology.) Pragmatism is to be contrasted with representationalism, which is the dominant theoretical approach throughout meta-ethics and the rest of philosophy, hewed to by everyone from the naturalist realist to the expressivist to the error theorist.

The Pragmatist vs. Representationalist split is not fundamentally a disagreement over which propositions are true, or even about which propositions we ought to accept. It's a difference in methodological orientation, or practice. Whereas the Pragmatist fundamentally endeavours to guide her inquiry and her belief-forming practices by considerations thought to bear on the values of forming her various beliefs, the Representationalist fundamentally endeavours to guide the same by considerations thought to bear on whether those beliefs are true.

It is pragmatism, then, which forms the positive program within which I aim to ensconce quietist objectivism. Pragmatism makes sense of how there can be objectively right answers in normative ethics that do not admit of vindication from the metaphysics of properties or the theory of reference — in just the same general way in which it makes sense of how there can be a right way to go in science, or math, or interior decorating. It explains ethics by unifying it in this way with other domains of inquiry, renders it less uncanny through assimilation.

It's fair to wonder, though: Mightn't there be yet another theoretical gloss on normative ethical inquiry and debate — one that, at the most fundamental explanatory level, employs concepts other than "substantivity" but also other than evaluative ones like "Truthy values" — that likewise makes room for ethical truth without "foundations"? Perhaps. But as I'll argue later, I'm as yet unconvinced. Nothing seems to accommodate this possibility as surely as does as my

[5] By William James (1907).

aforementioned story about the Truthy and the Specifically Ethical values. Importantly, though, even if there's some other way to *make room* for such a possibility, that's a far cry from *explaining* it, making sense of it, assimilating to a more general view of inquiry and the world. This is something that claim to be able to do through pragmatism. Not only do I *not rule out* quietism; I make sense of it, and I'd insist that any rival defender of quietism do the same.

And *even if* someone else can offer a way of accommodating ethical objectivity without foundations, and *even if* she also can render this situation less uncanny by placing it within what Enoch and McPherson called a "positive program", we should not presume that all such programs are otherwise on equal footing. There may be grounds other than explanatory power to favour some approach to inquiry. And so, after laying out my value-theoretic vindication of objectivist quietism and ensconcing it within a more general Pragmatist framework, I will give independent grounds for being a Pragmatist rather than a Representationalist.

Finally, let me forestall any suspicion that pragmatism is the fruit of unfettered bullet-biting on my part, undertaken in wild attempt to rationalize a meta-ethical view to which I was antecedently attracted. For better or worse, this broader worldview is a theoretical articulation of philosophical stirrings I've felt for a long time. Richard Rorty once wrote that the pragmatists stood at the end of a road down which many philosophers were travelling, whether they recognized it or not (1982, p. xvii). Well, I am one of those philosophers — only I have gleefully bounded down the road, and the end of it feels like home. The meta-ethical quietism came later. (To lay my cards on the table: I'd initially thought that the fruits of the pragmatist worldview would be some kind of quasi-Habermasian constitutivism. Cue the peanut gallery: "Ya shoulda stuck with that!")

Chapter-By-Chapter

While the pragmatism is the philosophical core of my argument, it will not emerge until later in the book. We will work our way up to it. In the next chapter, I begin my inquiry by

explaining what I take to be the "raw materials" for meta-ethics — those theoretically significant features of ethical inquiry and debate that we may apprehend without the aid of philosophical theory, using only our ordinary, well-focused powers of observation, bolstered or disciplined where appropriate by the empirical sciences. This is where I think *every* meta-ethicist must start who wishes to advance a "positive program" rather than to maintain a principled silence or simply fend off objections. But I would suggest that at least some others have trained their focus in the wrong places — started with the wrong raw materials — and so have lacked the resources from the outset to craft a meta-ethical theory that is both correct as well as sufficiently rich and explanatorily powerful. I take as my raw materials the aforementioned "depth/superficiality" of a debate or inquiry, and the special motivational and affective roles of ethical thought. Again, a debate or inquiry is deep if the conclusions one forms pursuant to that inquiry have the right sort of influence on one's other beliefs, one's non-conceptual representational states, and one's actions. A debate is superficial if its conclusions do not.

I "process", if you will, these raw materials to produce two explanations — one of why ethics is objective, and another of why it can sometimes seem not to be.

Chapter 3 contains the latter explanation. It seems very difficult to deny that ethics exhibits signs and symptoms of *not* being objective, which incline many reasonable people to think or at least worry that it's not. One might fairly ask the ethical objectivist: "Why does ethics display so many signs of being a realm of illusion or mere opinion, if indeed it admits of objectively right answers? After all, other objective domains — micro-biology, say, or math — *look* objective pretty much through-and-through." It seems to me that an objectivist account of ethics is incomplete unless it offers us a satisfactory answer to this question, but I have not seen any other objectivist provide one. And so that is what I will try to do in this chapter.

Chapter 4 is the centrepiece of the book, in which I lay out the details of my objectivist quietism and provide the arguments that directly support this view. First, I show that the relevant

sorts of ethical debates, on account of being superficial, can afford nothing in the way of either predictive, general-practical, or representational value — i.e. the "truthy" values. But again, metaphysics, semantics, the theory of rationality, and so on can generally bear on which ethical views to accept only if they bear on how much of the truthy values such acceptance affords. And so metaphysics, semantics, and the rest are generally irrelevant to which ethical views to accept. Most notably, wholesale jettisoning of our ethical beliefs is unwarranted by these extra-ethical considerations. Those pondering matters of fundamental ethics, then, can "go either way" in the way that participants in the Squirrel debate can, but for one not-so-little thing — the specifically *ethical* value, as distinguished from all three of the aforementioned "truthy" values, of going one way or the other.

I then sketch a metaphysically- and semantically-lightweight conception of truth that is proprietary to ethics, which ethical beliefs possess in virtue of the specifically ethical values of holding them, and explain why truth of this sort is important. After that, I argue that some such ethical beliefs are not only true (in this sense), but objectively so, where objectivity is understood as mind-independence of the relevant sort. I close out the chapter by addressing some objections to my view, and highlighting the ways it differs from a nearby competitor — sophisticated expressivism.

In Chapter 5, I place this value-theoretic vindication of ethics within a broader methodology in which *all* vindications —whether of particular claims or general domains ranging from molecular biology to math to sports prognostication — are ultimately evaluative. This is the methodology for which I reserve the label "Pragmatism". My hope is that by unifying the explanation from the previous chapter with the sorts of explanations the pragmatist wants to give of why all other legitimate claims or domains are in good order, we can fully dispel the heretofore outstanding mystery of how there can be objective ethical values without extra-ethical "foundations" in metaphysics, semantics, the theory of practical rationality, or what-have-you. I

begin the chapter by explaining more carefully what pragmatism amounts to, and by showing why it plays the powerful explanatory, mystery-dispelling role I claim for it. I then offer several arguments for why we ought to theorize in accordance with pragmatism rather than in keeping with its competitor, "Representationalism". After that, I respond to the objection that, by ensconcing everything within a global, autonomous evaluative "sphere", pragmatism — far from dispelling the mystery of the evaluative — makes seemingly unproblematic domains as mysterious as the evaluative one. I conclude by offering an explicit summary of what I've been up to so far — specifically, by emphasizing pragmatism's essential role in vindicating objectivist quietism.

In Chapter 6, I draw out the implications of my meta-ethical view for practice. I have two kind of practices in mind — that of ethical inquiry, and that of living together and making decisions with people of different ethical views. My view, of course, is that ethics is an autonomous domain of inquiry; fundamental ethical claims neither admit of nor require vindication from extra-ethical domains like metaphysics, semantics, and so on. But many philosophers working in meta-ethics and the foundations of normative ethics — from Wittgenstein-inspired "use" theorists, to Canberra-planners, to reductionist Humeans, to neo-Aristotelian naturalists, to contractarians, to Kantian constitutivists — offer up arguments or methodologies which would be sound only if ethics were not autonomous in this way. I will name the guilty parties, of whom there are surprisingly many, and explain where they go wrong. I will also have something to say about the quietist approach to moral knowledge generally.

Then I will explain the implications of my view for the question of how much we ought to defer to others on ethical matters, and for the question of how much toleration we ought to extend to those whom we judge are ethically misguided. I will argue that, generally, *less* deference but *more* toleration are warranted than would be if ethics worked like my principal non-quietist opponents think it does.

Having defended my meta-ethical view in Chapters 2 through 5 and explained in Chapter 6 how the view would work in practice, I hope that by this point the reader will understand the picture of ethics I'm proposing. It is a picture according to which ethics is objective, but, to be sure, different in some notable respects from paradigmatically objective domains of inquiry like the natural sciences. This prompts me to wonder whether my view "gives" us — with apologies to Raymond Carver — "what we care about when we care about ethical objectivity". I address this question in Chapter 7. I focus on two roles that objective values (or the belief in them, or the availability of arguments for their existence) would seem to play in our lives. First, it is plausible that they should play what I'll call an "existential" role — in motivating us, in enlivening us, in warding off conditions like nihilism and disenchantment. Second, it is plausible that they should play an "interpersonal" role — in partly determining certain sorts of real or perceived status-relations. I think the results are mixed. My view gives us objective values that can play both of these roles to a great extent, but perhaps not to as great an extent as some may have hoped. So in the last part of this chapter, I will try to talk you into caring less about what my view *can't* get us.

Chapter 8, which concludes the argument of the book, contains replies to some lingering objections that either I take to be pressing, or that I anticipate others will see as pressing. One of these, the "counternormativity" objection offered by Tristram McPherson and David Enoch, is an objection to quietist objectivism specifically. The Frege-Geach problem, which is typically regarded as an issue for *non-cognitivism*, also confronts a cognitivist view like mine which portrays normative ethical debates as less "world-involving" than many other important disputes. I will confront this problem head-on by spinning the account of ethical truth from Chapter 4 into an account of how the truth *conditions* of complex ethical expressions depend on those of simpler expressions. Other arguments apply to objectivist theories generally, but I address them in separate part because they are not as obviously defanged by the primary anti-skeptical argument in the book. The "evolutionary" and other "debunking" arguments fall into this category.

Some people think of meta-ethics as "trench warfare" or "normal science", in which progress is made incrementally, in which it's understood that every view has its pros and cons, and where the object is to show that the pros of your favoured theory outweigh the cons. This book is written with the conviction that meta-ethics is more like fairy-tale romance: the right theory will give you everything you've always wanted, including things you didn't even know you wanted, and it has no real cons, no shortcomings. Those who take the former view will typically be more content to settle for the best of the lot of well-known meta-ethical theories, albeit with the hopes of trying to fashion their chosen theory into the best version of itself. Those who take the latter view may find their ideal among the textbook theories — in which case, what wonderful luck! More likely, though, they will find themselves voyaging to the extremes — in my case, to a thoroughgoing pragmatism — to find a conception of value, mind, and world that they can love without reservation. Philosophers of both persuasions should regard subtlety and precision as virtues. But while the trench warriors will exercise those virtues mainly in trying to gain ground from their rivals, the romantics will do so mainly in trying to render clear what once was hazy, and to display as compossible a set of theoretical elements amongst which it had once been thought that one had to make hard, tragic choices.

I draw this contrast not with the aim of persuading you to become a romantic like me, but rather in the hope that it will help to illuminate some of my authorial decisions.