

Inferentialist Metaethics, Bifurcations and Ontological Commitment

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Abstract According to recent suggestions within the global pragmatism discussion, metaethical debate must be fundamentally re-framed. Instead of carving out metaethical differences in representational terms, it has been argued that metaethics should be given an inferentialist footing. In this paper, I put inferentialist metaethics to the test by subjecting it to the following two criteria for success: Inferentialist metaethicists must (1) be able to save the metaethical differences between moral realism and expressivism, and (2) do so in a way that employs understandings of these metaethical accounts which would be acceptable to moral realists or expressivists who endorse an inferentialist theory of meaning. Two results follow from my discussion. The first concerns inferentialist metaethics more narrowly, casting doubts on inferentialists' ability to fulfil the two criteria of success by showing that proposed metaethical demarcation attempts either meet the first criterion but violate the second, or pass the second criterion but fail the first. The second upshot pertains to the global pragmatism debate more widely, pressing the point that inferentialists have not as yet provided a convincing account of ontological commitment.

Keywords Inferentialism • Global Pragmatism • Expressivism • Moral Realism • Metaethics • Ontological Commitment

1 Introduction

Fundamental changes in philosophical outlook can be both exciting and daunting. They are exciting because they cast seemingly well acquainted philosophical terrain in a new, unfamiliar light by challenging long established assumptions, introducing new argumentative moves and shifting the philosophical geography of whole debates. They are daunting because they risk undermining those points of orientation that have traditionally helped us to navigate safely around this philosophical landscape, blurring its distinctive contours and obliterating well-known demarcation lines, thus leaving us somewhat bewildered in a philosophical environment we no longer seem to know.

Recent debates regarding minimalism about truth, global pragmatism and inferentialism are no different in this respect. By sweeping away 'old' bifurcations between different discourses through the deflation of their semantic foundations—'truth', 'fact', 'representation', 'belief'—they open up intriguing new perspectives on the assertoric nature of discourses and suggest a level account of propositional clothing where previously gaping gulfs have been located between different vocabularies.

Yet, this homogeneous approach to propositions also stirs up philosophical apprehension, as it renders unclear how intuitive differences between vocabularies can be carved out within this minimalist, pragmatist framework. It is no surprise, then, that recent contributions to the global pragmatism debate have been concerned more and more with a quest for ‘new’ bifurcations that are supposed to help us re-calibrate our philosophical compass.¹ This quest shows two different, albeit related, facets. The first considers how the diversity of different vocabularies—empirical, moral, mathematical, etc.—can be preserved within global pragmatism despite the unified account of propositional content that applies equally across all assertoric discourses. The ‘diverse unity’ of propositions, to use Huw Price’s (2013: 47) catchphrase, is thus the focal point of this first bifurcatory project. The second quest for bifurcation explores how different philosophical, in particular realist and irrealist, interpretations of the same vocabulary can be distinguished on pragmatist grounds. Applied to moral discourse, with the ‘old’ understandings of moral realism and expressivism being rendered obsolete, the question thus is how modified bifurcation theses can be established that still enable us to draw metaethical demarcation lines where we have traditionally placed them. Inferentialist metaethics promises to offer an answer to this second question. This suggests that metaethical positions are no longer to be delineated on grounds of their stances on the existence of moral truths and facts, or the nature of the mental states expressed by moral judgements. Rather, what distinguishes different metaethical accounts is the distinctive role that they attribute to moral statements within the inferentialist practice of giving and asking for reasons.

Although this paper also has a bearing on the first facet of this quest for new bifurcations, it is this second bifurcatory project in the guise of inferentialist metaethics that forms its focal point. Granting that inferentialism is the correct theory of meaning, and focussing on moral realism and expressivism only, my aim will be to assess the tenability of inferentialist metaethics by subjecting it to the following two criteria for success:

- Success Criteria In order to be successful, inferentialist metaethicists must
- (1) be able to save the metaethical differences between moral realism and expressivism, and
 - (2) do so in a way that employs understandings of these metaethical accounts which would be acceptable to moral realists or expressivists who endorse an inferentialist theory of meaning.

Both criteria should be uncontroversial. The first captures no more than the objective that inferentialist metaethicists set themselves. Since this includes establishing some form of disagreement between moral realists and expressivists, let us dub this the ‘disagreement criterion’. The second criterion—let us call this the ‘acceptability criterion’—demands that the new inferentialist understandings of metaethical accounts be such that those moral realists or expressivists who embrace inferentialism about

¹ The development from devising a new, non-representationalist account of meaning and truth, to working towards new bifurcations on grounds of different notions of representation, is most visible in Huw Price’s work. For a collection of key contributions to the global pragmatism debate, see Price (2013).

meaning would regard them as acceptable representations of their respective metaethical views. To understand the rationale behind this acceptability criterion, imagine a case in which it were *not* fulfilled. For instance, let us assume that inferentialists who also want to be moral realists reflected on how to couch their specific metaethical views in inferentialist terms. Assume further that these inferentialist moral realists found that, rather than being able to capture the spirit of their metaethical position within an inferentialist framework, the only available inferentialist characterisation of moral realism would define this position on grounds of metaethical theses which they in fact would not want to embrace. If so, it would be impossible for them to be inferentialists about meaning whilst at the same time advocating their preferred version of moral realism: the only way in which to be an inferentialist moral realist would be one they would want to reject. Hence, although there might indeed be *some* inferentialist re-construal of moral realism, those metaethicists who were supposed to champion this position would have been lost on the way. Consequently, if the inferentialist re-construal of the metaethical debate is to succeed, inferentialist understandings of metaethical accounts must be such that those inferentialists who advocate moral realism or expressivism would regard them as acceptable representations of their metaethical views. After all, inferentialist conceptions of metaethical accounts that amounted to nothing more than straw-men positions which nobody would actually want to defend, would be of no help in our search for a convincing inferentialist approach to metaethics.

Why limit the acceptability criterion to metaethicists who embrace inferentialism about meaning? The reason for this lies in the close intertwining of theories of meaning and specific metaethical views. Given this interlocking of positions, a moral realist or expressivist who rejects inferentialism as a theory of meaning outright would find *no* inferentialist re-construal of her respective metaethical views acceptable, no matter what this might involve.² In order to emphasise that general endorsement of inferentialism will be presupposed throughout this paper, I will, therefore, speak of inferentialist moral realists and inferentialist expressivists respectively.

Choosing Matthew Chrisman's (2008, 2011), Huw Price's (2013) and Michael Williams' (2013) considerations as my main reference points, this paper pursues two objectives. The first concerns inferentialist metaethics more narrowly, casting doubts on inferentialists' ability to fulfil the two criteria of success by showing that proposed metaethical demarcation attempts either meet the first criterion but violate the second, or pass the second criterion but fail the first. The second pertains to the global pragmatism debate more widely, pressing the point that inferentialists have not as yet found a convincing account of ontological commitment. To this effect, I start in the next section with Matthew Chrisman's initial account of inferentialist metaethics, which will be amended as the paper progresses. The third section explains why metaethical demarcation lines cannot be drawn within the 'heartland' of inferential relations, implying that inferentialism must be expanded in such a way as to accommodate considerations about explanation, causation and representation. The quest for new bifurcations on grounds of a substantive notion of the world will feature in the fourth and fifth sections, which will present a new, superior account as to how moral realism and expressivism might be re-cast in inferentialist terms. With this sophisti-

² I thank an anonymous referee for stressing this point.

cated understanding of inferentialist metaethical positions in place, the two objectives of this paper will be established in the sixth section. I finish with some short remarks on what my conclusions imply not just for inferentialist metaethics, but also for inferentialism more generally.

2 Inferentialist Metaethics

Chrisman's proposal of inferentialist metaethics combines two main ingredients, one being inferentialism as a general theory of meaning, the other being the distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning that is widely employed within philosophy. Starting with the former, Chrisman closely follows Robert Brandom in positing that the meaning of statements is constituted by their inferential role within the practice of making statements and asking for reasons (Chrisman 2008, 2011; Brandom 1994, 2008). This is specified, firstly, by the statements and circumstances that license making a particular statement *S*—call these the upstream inferential antecedents that can be quoted in support of *S*'s truth—and, secondly, by the statements and actions which are licensed by *S*—call these the downstream inferential consequences that follow from *S*. Asserting a statement amounts to undertaking an inferential commitment, where inferential commitments are neither to be understood ontologically in the sense of being commitments about the existence of some facts, nor psychologically as expressions of particular mental states. Instead, acknowledging a commitment primarily amounts to taking up a normative stance in the practice of giving and asking for reasons, standing ready when challenged to provide reasons in support of it (Chrisman 2011). Brandom's inferentialism, then, is strictly non-representationalist: When developing our theory of meaning, inferentialists tell us not to ask about the state of affairs that statements aim to represent or the objects to which they purportedly refer, but to locate their place within the intricate web of inferential relations. Semantic notions such as truth, representation and reference thus have no explanatory role to play within the inferentialist theory of propositional content. In line with minimalism, they remain well and truly deflated.

Turning to the second ingredient of inferentialist metaethics, Chrisman distinguishes between two different forms of inferential reasoning, one theoretical and the other practical. Theoretical reasoning "aims to expand our knowledge of how the world is" (Chrisman 2008: 334). Furthermore,

the premises of a theoretical inference should provide evidential support for the conclusion. When they do so adequately and one is committed to them, that is good theoretical reason to be committed to the conclusion. And when the conclusion is true, such a commitment will usually constitute theoretical knowledge about the world (Chrisman 2008: 349-350).

In contrast, the characteristic features of a statement belonging to the sphere of practical reasoning are, firstly, that this statement is licensed by some other practical statement and, secondly, that a practical statement can license action. In Chrisman's (2008: 350-351) words,

the premises of a practical inference should provide practical support for the conclusion. When they do so and one is committed to the premises, that is good prac-

tical reason to be committed to the conclusion. And when the conclusion is true, such a commitment can constitute practical knowledge about how to interact with the world as we know it to be.

Inferential relations can thus be conceived as forming an intricate justificatory web which has an inside, but which also has edges. Its inside is constituted by the multitude of justificatory inferential moves within the game of giving and asking for reasons. Its edges form the interface between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena by allowing for language entry and language exit moves. Whereas entry transitions consist in non-inferential reports of observations, exit transitions concern actions which aim at bringing about states of affairs that respond to a position within the language game (Brandom 1994: 234-235). In this new terminology, then, it is this justification of language exit moves that constitutes the characteristic feature of practical statements.

With these distinctions in place, Chrisman (2008: 353) now suggests re-casting metaethical accounts in the following way:³

Inferentialist Moral Realism	Moral statements express theoretical commitments and some of them are true.
Inferentialist Expressivism	Moral statements express practical commitments.

Notice here that according to inferentialism, both moral and non-moral commitments are essentially inferentially articulated assertions “in the basic sense of both standing in need of reasons and being fit to serve as reasons” (Brandom 1997: 150). Consequently, expressivism can no longer be distinguished from moral realism by denying the genuinely assertoric character of moral statements. Likewise, ‘old’ bifurcation theses, dividing vocabularies into those that are genuinely truth-apt, fact-stating and descriptive and those to which at best quasi-truth, quasi-facts and quasi-description can be ascribed, are no longer available. Instead, the contrastive, bifurcating function that was once borne by the concepts of assertion, truth and fact is now to be assumed by theses about the specific spheres of inferentialist practice within which assertoric moral claims are taken to be embedded.

This inferentialist re-construal of metaethical accounts in terms of theoretical and practical reasoning is certainly promising. After all, both criteria of success appear to

³ As flagged above, I will focus here on the distinction between moral realism and expressivism only whilst bracketing error-theories which, if we are to follow Chrisman (2008: 353), categorise moral claims as theoretical commitments, yet maintain that no positive moral claim is true. I am not convinced of this take on error-theories, as it ignores the insight that denials of truth are, on a minimalist account, moves *within* moral discourse, leading to severe doubts about the internal consistency of error-theories. Regarding the fourth traditional metaethical competitor—constructivism—Chrisman (2008: 353) confesses that he does not know “where to slot it in”. I share his hesitation only partially. For, one possible definition of constructivism could be the following: Moral statements express theoretical commitments and some of them are true, where their truth depends on our beliefs. This appeal to mind-dependence is not to be interpreted representationally, but inferentially. On this inferentialist reading, endorsement of mind-dependence amounts to being committed to accepting inferential moves from statements such as ‘Rational agents would freely choose principles of justice that provide for equal income distribution’ to moral statements such as ‘Equal income distribution is just’. However, Chrisman’s hesitation might be warranted with regard to other constructivist views such as Korsgaard’s (2009).

be satisfied: Not only is a difference between inferentialist moral realism and expressivism explicitly stated, but this difference also seems to succeed in capturing the spirit of the realist/expressivist debate. For, where traditional moral realists used to stress similarities between moral and non-moral discourses by pointing to moral belief's truth-aptness and mind-to-world direction of fit, inferentialist moral realists can refer to the characteristic features of theoretical reasoning when developing their account. Similarly, whilst traditional expressivists relied on psychological theses about the kind of mental states voiced by moral statements in order to drive home their case for the practicality of morality, inferentialist expressivists can draw on theses about practical reasoning in order to state their position. The metaethical demarcation lines, then, appear to be drawn in exactly the right places.

3 Why the 'inferentialist heartland' is not enough

Alas, the *prima facie* plausibility of this first bifurcation attempt quickly starts to buckle when subjected to closer scrutiny. To elaborate, the proposed distinction between inferentialist moral realism and expressivism succeeds only if the disagreement criterion is met. This, in turn, is the case only if inferentialist moral realists reject that moral commitments are practical commitments, whilst inferentialist expressivists deny that moral commitments are theoretical commitments. For all that has been said up to this point, though, it is far from clear why either should be the case.

This is particularly obvious with regard to inferentialist expressivists' purported denial of moral statements' theoretical nature. The characteristic feature of theoretical reasoning, Chrisman (2008: 349-350) tells us, is that a *true* conclusion of a theoretical inference "will ... constitute theoretical *knowledge* about the *world*." It might be assumed that inferentialist expressivists are supposed to take exception to this theoretical classification of moral commitments because of the three notions that I italicised: 'truth', 'knowledge' and 'world'. Given the minimalist and inferentialist background of our discussion, though, it is clear that this assumption is unfounded. The whole crux of the problem of creeping minimalism is, after all, that expressivists no longer have reason to oppose theses about the existence of moral truths and facts. On the minimalist reading, stating that it is true that *p* boils down to asserting that *p*, which, as inferentialists tell us, amounts to acknowledging one's commitment to '*p*'. And since such commitments are to be read along the lines of inferential entitlements and obligations, nothing in this account runs contrary to inferentialist expressivism. Similarly, inferentialist expressivists can freely agree that the world is the totality of facts and that moral facts are part of this world, given that facts are nothing more than true propositions. Finally, inferentialist expressivists would be more than happy to sign up to an inferentialist account of moral knowledge, as for instance suggested by Brandom (1994: 202) who specifies that when "taking someone to be a knower, one *attributes a commitment, attributes entitlement* to that commitment, and *acknowledges commitment* to the same content oneself". Given the minimal readings of 'true' and 'world', then, there is no reason for inferentialist expressivists to reject the claim that moral statements are theoretical commitments, and that those that are true constitute moral knowledge about the moral world.

Similarly, inferentialist moral realism is compatible with the thesis that moral statements are practical commitments. The reason why might not be quite as apparent, but is also easily grasped. The characteristic feature of true practical commitments, we have learnt, is that they constitute practical knowledge about how to interact with the world as we know it to be. We have already fleshed this out by appeal to language exit moves (Chrisman 2011): Practical commitments justify language exit moves in the form of intentions to act in certain ways. Importantly, this understanding of practical commitments is not to be equated with judgement-internalism:⁴ It does not tie moral statements to *psychological motivations* for action, but to *justifications* and *reasons* for actions. Accordingly, when stating that moral statements express practical commitments, we do not put forward the view that these statements necessarily voice specific motivational mental states, but instead hold that a claim such as ‘I ought (all things considered) to give to charity’ justifies, or provides a reason, for my donating money to charity (Chrisman 2011). In contrast, a claim such as ‘My desk is black’ justifies no specific course of action and does not, therefore, qualify as a practical commitment. Once it is fully appreciated that theses about the practicality of commitments concern the *prima facie* justification of actions, though, it is no longer clear why inferentialist moral realists would need to reject them. For, why should they deny that true moral statements justify, or provide reasons for, intentions and actions? Even the staunchest judgement-externalist could agree that although moral judgements are not linked to motivations for action, they nevertheless provide moral reasons for such motivations and actions—rejection of a psychological thesis does, after all, not necessitate rejection of a normative thesis.⁵ Consequently, since inferentialist moral realism is compatible with a positive stance on the reason-giving, justificatory force of moral judgements, inferentialist moral realists need not deny that moral statements are practical commitments which justify language exit moves.⁶ As a result, the spheres of theoretical and practical reasoning need not be mutually exclusive: Given minimalism and inferentialism, both inferentialist moral realists and expressiv-

⁴ Judgement-internalism is compatible with inferentialism as long as the thesis that practical commitments express motivational mental states is not entangled with the claim that expression of these mental states constitutes the meaning of moral statements. Still, if we take seriously inferentialists’ aim to leave psychological states behind when searching for new bifurcation theses, we should try to capture claims about the practicality of normative claims within the inferentialist structure, not on grounds of mental states.

⁵ It might be argued that I am moving too quickly by employing too thin a notion of practical commitment. For, inferentialists might specify that a commitment qualifies as genuinely practical, not merely if it provides reasons for action, but if it is a commitment to act in a specific way. On this basis, they could argue further that whilst it might be true that inferentialist moral realists need not reject the thesis that moral claims provide reasons for action, they would rebut the claim that they are commitments to act in a certain manner. Although there is something in this approach, I still think that it falls short as it is not clear that all practical commitments—and not just all-things-considered claims—can be construed as direct commitments to act in a certain way. Moreover, even if inferentialist moral realists rejected this thick sense of practical moral commitment, it would now be clear only what inferentialist moral realism stands *against*, not what it stands *for*, as inferentialist expressivists can still accept that true moral commitments constitute knowledge about the world. Since I believe that EMUs provide a superior way to devise inferentialist metaethics (see section 5), I will not pursue these lines of argument here. I thank Matthew Chrisman for pressing me on this point.

⁶ To avoid misunderstanding, let me clarify that an inferentialist moral realist is committed neither to denying the reason-giving force of moral statements nor to accepting it.

ists can agree that true moral conclusions constitute moral knowledge about the moral world, just as they can agree that moral judgements provide reasons for intentions and actions. The disagreement criterion is thus violated. No metaethical differences have been saved.

Still, we can learn three lessons from this result. Firstly, it urges us not to lose sight of the *normative* nature of inferential moves within the practice of giving and asking for reasons. Identifying the specific positioning of moral commitments within the multitude of inferential relations is, after all, a normative exercise.⁷ As has been demonstrated with regard to inferentialist moral realism's potential acceptance of moral commitments' practical status, this can have a significant effect on the identification of metaethical disagreement since these normative issues might be less contentious than former metaphysical or psychological disputes. Secondly, we must acknowledge that inferentialist moral realists need not deny the practical nature of moral commitments if understood as justifying language exit transitions. When rebuilding moral realism within the inferentialist framework, we should thus allow for the possibility that inferentialist moral realists conceive of moral commitments as both theoretical and practical in the sense of providing reasons for actions. Finally, since the minimal reading of the theoretical/practical distinction is too thin to shoulder any bifurcatory weight, it is clear that this distinction must be 'beefed up' if it is to lay the foundations for metaethical differences as demanded by the disagreement criterion. Consequently, inferentialists need to find non-minimal interpretations of 'theoretical' and 'practical' which are such that (a) inferentialist moral realists and expressivists are not equally prepared to apply them to moral claims, whilst (b) being compatible with inferentialism as a general theory of meaning. Finding these notions is exactly the task that participants of the global pragmatism debate have recently taken on. They tackle it by bringing the 'e-world' back in.

4 Bringing the e-world back in

The finding that the minimal readings of 'truth' and 'world' cannot account for the realist/expressivist distinction will hardly come as a surprise to followers of the debate about global pragmatism. For, all that we have done so far when talking about moral truths and facts is, adopting Huw Price's (2013: 55) terminology, to move around the 'i-world': the *internal world of inferential relations*, in which we find nothing more than i-representation. i-Representation concerns the internal or inferential role of a specific assertion within our assertoric language games. As has been explained above, the propositional content of assertions is constituted by their place within the practice of giving and asking for reasons. Having propositional content now trivially ensures that assertions state or i-represent what they are about, if 'about' is given a minimal reading: The proposition that my desk is black is about my desk's

⁷ It might be thought that this is false, holding that although moves *within* the inferential web must be understood as taking up normative stances, stating that moral claims are practical commitments is a thesis *about* moral vocabulary and, therefore, not normative. However, this criticism is unsuccessful. After all, when adopting inferentialism, it is, to use Brandom's words (1994: 625), norms all the way down: "The distinction between normative and nonnormative vocabulary, claims and facts is itself drawn in normative terms."

being black; the statement that killing is wrong *i*-represents the wrongness of killing; the claim that ‘The balcony room’ by von Menzel is beautiful is about the painting’s beauty; etc. Accordingly, since the *i*-world is simply what *i*-representations are about, moves from the acceptance of assertions, to their truth, to the facts or the world that they represent are free, and are so no matter whether we deal with empirical, mathematical, or moral assertions, say. It is no wonder, then, that *i*-representation establishes neither a bifurcation between different vocabularies nor between their realist or irrealist interpretations.

Since Price is, of course, fully aware of this, he suggests introducing a second notion of ‘world’ and ‘representation’ which must not be confused with the *i*-senses thereof. This is *e*-representation, which is to be understood along the lines of environmental or external function. How exactly *e*-representation is to be fleshed out will be our focus shortly. First, though, let me briefly sketch the argumentative strategy that the introduction of *e*-representation allows us to pursue. To start with, we specify that although all vocabularies *i*-represent the *i*-world, only some vocabularies *e*-represent⁸ the *e*-world. Next, we declare that those vocabularies which are *e*-representational carry special, non-minimalist ontological commitment. Ontologically committed vocabularies are then associated with realism, whereas vocabularies which are not *e*-representational are linked with irrealism. Finally, this allows us to devise the following new realist/expressivist distinction: Although both inferentialist moral realists and expressivists agree that moral commitments are *i*-representational (and that they justify language exit transitions), inferentialist moral realists submit that moral vocabulary is also *e*-representational, whereas inferentialist expressivists reject this thesis.

Whether or not this strategy is crowned with success depends, of course, on how the notions of *e*-representation and ontological commitment are spelt out. Let me briefly explain why two relatively widespread takes on ontological commitment are not fully convincing before turning to a more promising attempt in the next section. The first is found in Chrisman’s (2011: 16) later paper, where he supplements his earlier thoughts on theoretical and practical reasoning by proposing that “ontological commitment tracks not with commitment to something’s being true but with something’s being part of the best natural explanation of what we can observe.” Accordingly, just as the statement ‘Grass contains chlorophyll’ is implicitly explanatory in the sense that “part of what it obligates one to inferentially is a certain explanatory claim—viz. that grass’s being full of chlorophyll explains why we can observe certain things about grass” (Chrisman 2011: 16), those inferentialists who want to be moral realists are to hold that moral statements are equally explanatory, whereas those who endorse expressivism are supposed to reject this explanatory thesis. Unfortunately, Chrisman’s explanations of this revised proposal remain very terse and thus leave several pressing questions unanswered.⁹ However, my main interest here does not lie

⁸ According to Price (2013: 46), even scientific language—and thus one paradigmatic domain of *e*-representation—is not fully *e*-representational as it is imbued with non-*e*-representational modal talk. I will neglect these subtleties here.

⁹ To mention but one such question, the inferential relation between (A) ‘Grass is full of chlorophyll’, (B) ‘Grass is green’ and (C) ‘Grass’s being full of chlorophyll explains why we can observe grass’s being green’ remains rather obscure. Does (C) explicate a relation that holds between (A) and (B)? Or what makes the inference from (A) to (C) good? This obscurity

with the proposal as such, but with its ability to establish the metaethical differences. And with regard to this latter question, it is once more not clear that the disagreement criterion is fulfilled, i.e. that inferentialist expressivists would indeed need to deny that moral commitments are explanatory in this sense. In their recent contributions to the somewhat tortuous debate of moral explanation, expressivists such as Blackburn (1993) and Gibbard (2003) have, after all, been happy to agree that moral claims can feature in explanations of non-moral phenomena, even though they regard these explanations as distinctly moral. Consequently, when wearing their moral hats, inferentialist expressivists appear free to endorse inferential moves from moral statements such as ‘Significant income differentials are unjust’ to explanatory claims such as ‘The injustice of significant income differentials explains why we can observe revolutions in unequal societies’.¹⁰ Given the vexed issue of moral explanation, then, Chrisman must spell out in much more detail which aspect of the explanatory thesis it is about which inferentialist moral realists and expressivists supposedly disagree.

The second take on ontological commitment also operates with the notion of explanation, yet focuses on a very specific explanandum, namely moral language. This Eleatic proposal is familiar enough:¹¹ Ontological commitment, or realist status, is to attach only to those vocabularies, the explanation of which requires that we employ their referring expressions. Consequently, just as talk about trees must be interpreted along realist lines because our explanation of why we use the concept ‘tree’ inevitably appeals to trees, moral realists are taken to submit that moral claims carry ontological commitment because our explanation of why we talk in terms of ‘justice’, ‘goodness’ and ‘virtue’, say, must refer to justice, goodness and virtue. Expressivists are then to reject such ‘flat-footed’ explanations of moral vocabulary, as Blackburn (2013: 71) calls them, and offer some pragmatist account of moral language instead. Although this shift in focus from the general moral explanation debate to linguistic matters certainly follows in the inferentialist spirit, we must be careful how to spell it out. For, what this proposal must *not* imply, is that certain vocabularies require a pragmatist explanation, whereas others are to be given a flat-footed, *non*-pragmatist account. Any such position would clearly contradict inferentialism about meaning, which holds that no matter whether we enquire into the use of descriptive language or of moral and causal vocabulary, say, a pragmatist answer is called for. At the same time, given the diverse unity of propositions, it is clear that the details of these respective

also carries over to the moral context, as in ‘Significant income differentials are unjust’, ‘Revolutions occur in unequal societies’ and ‘The injustice of significant income differentials explains why we can observe revolutions in unequal societies’. I will not pursue these urgent questions about Chrisman’s proposal here, but instead copy his formulations of implicit explanatory status verbatim when applying them to the moral example. The main point I want to press, then, is not that Chrisman’s take on explanatory status requires clarification and possibly improvement, but that for all we know from Chrisman’s brief comments on this matter, it cannot convincingly distinguish between moral realism and expressivism.

¹⁰ Of course, this account can be rejected as false or at least objectionably oversimplified, but it is its role within metaethical debate that is at stake here, not its plausibility. Although expressivists have so far shied away from admitting as much, inferentialist expressivism might even be compatible with the thesis that it is injustice, and not simply income differentials, which causes revolutions (see section 6.1). In addition, compare also Chrisman’s (2008) own criticism of Dreier’s (2004) explanatory approach and my previous footnote about Chrisman’s take on implicit explanatory status.

¹¹ Compare Blackburn (1980, 1984, 1998), Gibbard (2003), Dreier (2004).

pragmatist accounts must differ.¹² How exactly this pragmatist diversity might be achieved will be covered next.

5 Introducing EMUs

Inferentialists, then, need a more nuanced tool to capture differences in pragmatist explanations of vocabularies. Michael Williams' (2013) EMUs provide exactly that. EMUs are explanations of *meaning* in terms of *use* and comprise the following three elements:

1. (I-T): A *material-inferential* (intra-linguistic) component, comprising the inferential patterns in which a concept stands, thus determining its conceptual meaning.
2. (E-T): An *epistemological* component, specifying the epistemological circumstances of competent language use.
3. (F-T): A *functional* component, detailing what the concept is used for.

If EMUs are supposed to pave the inferentialists' way to the realist/expressivist distinction, two conditions must hold. Firstly, inferentialist moral realists and expressivists must offer different EMUs for moral language whilst mutually rejecting their respective proposals. Secondly, the EMU offered by inferentialist moral realists must be ontologically committing, whereas the EMU offered by inferentialist expressivists must be ontologically non-committing or conservative. For now, let us follow Williams' (2013: 141) suggestion that an EMU will count as ontologically committing if it involves substantial world-word relations, where these relations are, in line with inferentialism, not semantic but causal, and concern language entry transitions, not language exit transitions. A more specific account of ontological commitment will follow later.

Very helpfully, Williams provides an example of a paradigmatically ontologically committing EMU, namely that of the concept 'red', as well as ontologically conservative EMUs of the concepts 'cause' and 'ought'. His primary aim in presenting these EMUs is to illustrate how dissimilarities between different vocabularies can be captured within inferentialism, not how different philosophical interpretations of the same vocabulary pan out within this inferentialist picture. Still, we can hitch our thoughts to Williams' suggestions by assuming that moral realists would want to model their EMU of a moral concept such as 'good'¹³ on that of 'red', whereas expressivists would reject any such resemblance between these EMUs. The result might be the following:

¹² Compare also Price's (2013: 58-60; 158) remarks on the Eleatic criterion.

¹³ Although discussion about inferentialist treatments of normative terms usually focuses on 'ought', I choose the word 'good' here. This is because 'ought' may have a different function in normative language than evaluative concepts such as 'good', 'bad', 'just', 'generous', etc. The difference between inferentialist moral realism and expressivism can arguably be brought out more clearly in the case of evaluative concepts than in that of 'ought'. Chrisman (2012) appears to disagree.

Realist EMU of 'good'

1. (I-G):
 - (a) The inference from 'x is good' to 'x is *prima facie* permissible', 'There are reasons to do x', etc. is always good.
 - (b) Inferences from 'x is good' to 'x maximises utility' ('x is based on specific intentions', etc.) and *vice versa* are good only if entitlement to other moral commitments holds, such as 'What maximises utility is good'.
2. (E-G):
 - (a) Inferential patterns detailed in sub-clause (1a) are free. Inferential moves as specified in (1b) require justification on grounds of moral theories.
 - (b) Commitment and entitlement to moral claims such as 'x is good' always imply commitment and entitlement to corresponding non-moral claims.
 - (c) Judging x to be good justifies, or provides a reason for, the intention to act in accordance with this judgement.¹⁴
 - (d) To master 'good' in its reporting use, the speaker must have a reliable discriminative reporting disposition (RDRD), a disposition, given appropriate motivation and conditions, to report 'x is good' when confronted with something good.
3. (F-G): In a reporting use, tokens of 'x is good' express reliable discriminative reactions to an environmental circumstance. Their role is to keep track of goodness, in this way functioning as language entry transitions.

Expressivist EMU of 'good'

1. (I-G):
 - (a) The inference from 'x is good' to 'x is *prima facie* permissible', 'There are reasons to do x', etc. is always good.
 - (b) Inferences from 'x is good' to 'x maximises utility' ('x is based on specific intentions', etc.) and *vice versa* are good only if entitlement to other commitments holds, such as 'What maximises utility is good'.
2. (E-G):
 - (a) Inferential patterns detailed in sub-clause (1a) are free. Inferential moves as specified in (1b) require justification on grounds of moral theories.
 - (b) Commitment and entitlement to moral claims such as 'x is good' always imply commitment and entitlement to corresponding non-moral claims.
 - (c) Judging x to be good justifies, or provides a reason for, the intention to act in accordance with this judgement.
3. (F-G): 'Good' expresses endorsement of inferential patterns that allow for language exit moves, connecting moral commitments with actions. This allows us to coordinate our lives and to deliberate about our actions.

Let me make a few important observations with regard to these EMUs. To start with, it is noticeable that although the EMUs offered by inferentialist moral realists and expressivists differ in crucial respects, they also show considerable overlap. This, though, is as it should be. For, although inferentialist moral realists and expressivists might disagree about the specific function of a moral concept such as 'good', there is no reason why they would need to disagree about its substantial meaning as specified in the material-inferential sub-clauses (1a+b). The same holds true for most sub-clauses of the EMUs' epistemological components. (2a), ruling out free moves between moral and non-moral commitments, is based on Hume's law and Moore's naturalistic fallacy. Since both inferentialist moral realists and expressivists can and usual-

¹⁴ As clarified in footnote 6, inferentialist moral realists can but need not endorse the practicality of moral commitments. Here, I simply assume that they do. If they did not, this sub-clause would have to be omitted.

ly do endorse Hume's and Moore's principles, their convergence on (2a) should not be surprising. (2b), in turn, gives expression to the insight that moral claims supervene on non-moral claims or, to use Dworkin's (2011: 114) phrasing, that no moral commitment can be 'barely true'. Given their shared acceptance of moral supervenience, both inferentialist moral realists and expressivists can reflect this endorsement through their respective EMUs.¹⁵ Finally, we can see that both inferentialist expressivists and realists are free to account for the practicality of moral concepts by including clause (2c) within their respective EMUs. On the one hand, this pays heed to the insight that inferentialist moral realists need not reject the claim that moral commitments provide reasons for action and justify language exit moves. On the other hand, it establishes a significant advantage over Chrisman's original inferentialist reconstruction of moral realism, in that it enables inferentialist moral realists to draw attention to an important contrast between 'red' and 'good', namely the fact that 'good' shows a normative facet which 'red' lacks. As such, the realist EMU kills two birds with one stone: it not only manages to draw parallels between moral and non-moral concepts, but also explicates what makes moral concepts distinctly normative.

Yet, this considerable degree of convergence should not detract from the fact that these EMUs also capture significant disagreement. We have stated above that if inferentialists are to re-establish the metaethical differences between moral realism and expressivism, they must find non-minimal interpretations of 'theoretical' and 'practical' which are such that (a) inferentialist moral realists and expressivists are not equally prepared to apply them to moral claims, whilst (b) being compatible with inferentialism as a general theory of meaning. This is exactly the task that the epistemological sub-clause (2d) and the differing F-components (3) are intended to discharge. Starting with practical status, we can see that although realist and expressivist EMUs agree on including the justification of language exit moves within their epistemological components (2c), they disagree about its inclusion within the functional clause (3). Whereas the expressivist EMU identifies the licensing of language exit transitions as the function of moral vocabulary, inferentialist moral realists proclaim that the function of moral vocabulary is to track goodness, not to express inferential patterns involving moves to actions. Distinguishing between (2c) and (3) thus enables inferentialists to carve out scope for a first contrast between moral realism and expressivism with regard to the practical role of moral concepts: Whereas inferentialist moral realists can concur with inferentialist expressivists that moral statements are practical if understood along the lines of (2c), they reject the expressivist thesis that moral claims are practical in the sense of (3).

If theoretical status is also to be given a non-minimal reading, it is clear that the tracking-relation featuring in the realist EMU's (3) must not be understood along the lines of *i*-tracking, i.e. as the tracking of inferential commitments that are undertaken within the representing system and subject to the correctness rules of the respective assertoric language game. Firstly, such *i*-tracking relations apply to all assertoric discourses and thus never qualify as the distinctive function of a specific vocabulary. Secondly, inferentialist expressivists could happily agree that moral statements track

¹⁵ Inclusion of (2b) also enables moral realists to highlight that although concepts such as 'red' and 'good' are alike in important respects, they differ crucially in others. I will elaborate on this shortly.

moral facts in this i-sense. For, there is no reason for them to deny that someone who masters the term ‘good’ will, given appropriate motivation and conditions, report goodness when encountering it. This is, after all, what being a reliable moral judge is all about. They could even concur that moral commitments express these discriminative moral reactions of ours and track moral truths. Consequently, if appeal to discriminative reporting dispositions in (3) is supposed to establish some difference between inferentialist moral realism and expressivism, a substantial, ontologically committing, environment-tracking paradigm of representation must be in play that concerns robust world-word relations. Put in Price’s (2013: 36) terms, this is e-representation, where an item of the representing system is intended to answer to the environment by co-varying with some feature of the represented system: the e-world. Understood along these substantial lines, the realist EMU’s (2d) and (3) thus allow room for a second contrast between inferentialist moral realism and expressivism. For, although inferentialist expressivists agree that moral claims are theoretical commitments if understood in terms of i-representation, they will reject the realist thesis that moral statements are theoretical commitments if understood in terms of e-representation along the lines of language entry transitions. As a result, realist EMUs of moral concepts are ontologically committing, whereas expressivist EMUs remain ontologically conservative. Thanks to the flexibility offered by tripartite EMUs, then, we have now arrived at the strongest attempt to re-construct the metaethical landscape on inferentialist grounds.

6 Trouble in the e-world

Appeal to EMUs is, in my view, an ingenious attempt to account for the diverse unity of propositions. Moreover, I believe that the expressivist EMU suggested here captures the spirit of expressivism extremely well. Still, I will argue next that these EMUs ultimately fail to save the metaethical debate. My argument takes the form of a dilemma and is triggered by the following simple question: Can e-representation, and thus the mark of ontological commitment, be meaningfully applied to vocabularies other than empirical¹⁶ descriptive terms, i.e. the paradigmatic sphere of e-representation (Price 2013: 55)? No matter how inferentialists choose to answer this question, I will show that they face bad news: Either, they explain that e-representation pertains, *as a matter of stipulation*, exclusively to empirical descriptive vocabulary. If so, inferentialist moral realism is trivially ruled out and the disagree-

¹⁶ Let me make a quick comment on my use of ‘empirical’ here. As will become clear shortly, when referring to the paradigmatic sphere of e-representation, Price often speaks more narrowly of the *scientific* perspective and *scientific* vocabulary, rather than more broadly about *empirical* descriptive vocabulary. Since I will refer to some text passages in which Price makes explicit use of this more narrow perspective in the next paragraph, I will follow him in appealing to science a few times. Nevertheless, the broader focus on empirical descriptive vocabulary is more suitable for my purposes, as I will follow Williams (2013) in discussing the term ‘red’ as a paradigmatically e-representational concept in the second half of this section. Although colour terms such as ‘red’ are empirical, *observational* terms, and are thus widely assumed to be e-representational, they are arguably not *scientific* concepts. Limiting my focus to scientific vocabulary would, therefore, be misleadingly narrow, whereas my use of ‘empirical’ is supposed to be broad enough to include both theoretical and observational vocabulary. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

ment criterion is violated. Or they state that it is an open question, to be decided by *substantial enquiries* rather than by fiat, whether or not e-representation also applies to non-empirical vocabularies such as moral concepts. If so, I will argue that the only way to establish metaethical differences on grounds of e-representation imposes theses on inferentialist moral realists which many of them would want to reject, thus violating the acceptability criterion. Either way, then, inferentialists fail to present an acceptable account of metaethical debate on grounds of e-representation.

Let me begin with the first horn of this dilemma. The reason why appeal to e-representation and the e-world threatens to rule out inferentialist moral realism by definition comes into view once the link between e-representation, the e-world and empirical discourses is fully appreciated. e-Representation, Price tells us, concerns a robust, natural relation between statements and the e-world: our environment. Despite this robustness, though, the conception of the e-world is not supposed to introduce a metaphysical notion of the world that could be assessed from some Archimedean viewpoint outside of our linguistic practices. Rather, it too presupposes a first-order linguistic standpoint. In the case of the e-world, this is the perspective of science: “Roughly, the e-world is visible only from within science in precisely the same sense as the i-world is visible only from within the viewpoint of users of assertoric vocabularies in general. Indeed, the e-world simply *is* the i-world of the scientific vocabulary” (Price 2013: 55). e-Representation is then simply a technical term that we introduce for theoretical purposes so as to capture the link between empirical descriptive statements and the e-world. Yet, if this is so, then the argument against the inferentialist construal of moral realism is quickly made. Since the e-world is, by stipulation, the i-world of empirical descriptive vocabularies, and since moral statements are not part of empirical descriptive vocabularies, moral facts are not part of the e-world.¹⁷ Furthermore, since e-representation is a relation between statements and the e-world, e-representation can only ever apply to empirical descriptive claims and not to moral statements. Consequently, any claim to the effect that moral vocabulary is e-representational must be based on conceptual confusion about the notion of e-representation. The realist EMU, attributing e-representational status to moral vocabulary, is thus a non-starter, ruled out by definition. The metaethical differences evaporate once more.

Several passages in Price (2013) suggest this take on e-representation.¹⁸ If correct, inferentialists would need to come up with some other way of distinguishing moral realism from expressivism that does not rely on e-representation. It would also

¹⁷ Could morality be a phenomenon that is visible from within empirical discourses, although moral terms are not part of empirical language? Of course, morality as an empirical phenomenon—as existing practices, utterances, etc.—is the object of empirical research. The same applies to the natural facts on which moral facts supervene. However, theses such as ‘Moral facts just are natural facts’ are not eligible for empirical study.

¹⁸ Compare Price (2013): “Does Sellars’ account of matter-of-factual truth, or mine of e-representation, support this kind of argument for object naturalism? The answer is ‘no’, because it is a matter of *stipulation*, not *discovery*, that it is claims about the natural world that pass this test” (168). “In the exclusive or narrow sense, it is a matter of stipulation that all the facts are the natural facts. In the inclusive or broad sense, it is immediate ... that this is not the case” (169). “And for *world*, as for *fact*, it becomes a trivial matter that the world is the natural world, or a trivial matter that it is not, depending on which of the two senses we have in mind” (170). Compare also Price (2013: 191).

imply that the two facets of the quest for new bifurcations mentioned at the outset of this paper come apart: Whilst the notion of e-representation might still be fit to distinguish empirical from non-empirical vocabularies (although the meaningfulness of this contrast could reasonably be questioned), it would not be suitable to function as a mark of realism as it would render it trivially true that empirical disciplines are the only discourses to be interpreted along realist lines.

However, other sections in Price (2013: 184-185) hint at a different approach to e-representation. On this alternative interpretation, it is open to discovery, and not settled by definition, which vocabularies are in the business of e-representation. More precisely, whether or not a specific vocabulary is e-representational depends on whether or not it has the function to e-track some facts. And since it is an open, non-trivial question which function a specific vocabulary possesses, it is also an open, non-trivial question whether or not moral vocabulary is in the business of e-tracking. If so, inferentialist moral realism would become a going concern again: although the realist, e-representational EMU of 'good' might, of course, still turn out to be false, holding moral vocabulary to be e-representational would no longer involve any conceptual confusion about the notion of e-representation. As such, the first horn of the dilemma would be avoided.

To gain purchase on this second approach to e-representation and see why it finally leads to the second horn of the dilemma, it is helpful to spell out in more detail what is involved in claiming that a vocabulary is e-representational and ontologically committing. Let us adopt here a specifically strong notion of ontological commitment that takes its cue from a class of concepts which is generally regarded as being e-representational. These are observation-terms such as 'red', which are characterised by two key features. Firstly, the discriminative reporting dispositions referred to in their corresponding EMUs essentially involve causal relations between the reporter and the environment. In the case of 'red', this includes telling an elaborate story about our visual apparatus, the absorption and reflection of light, laws of optical theory, etc. This causal story is provided by empirical research, explaining how the co-variation between such observation reports and red objects comes about. Secondly, observation reports carry a specific authority, in that an observer's reporting the presence of something red usually establishes entitlement to the claim that there is something red. That is, when asked why I believe that there is something red, pointing out that I have seen a red object is generally a good answer—no further information or scientific story need to be provided as to why I take it that there is something red. Observation reports, then, are 'default justified': they do not require inferential support from other premises. This is also why observation reports are taken to function as language-entry transitions, ensuring that our linguistic web, instead of floating free in an empirical void, is firmly hooked to our non-linguistic environment. Pinning ontological commitment to such language-entry transitions, then, aligns well with the basic intuition that it is exactly this connection to our non-linguistic environment that is the mark of a realist discourse.

Accordingly, when submitting that moral terms are e-representational and ontologically committing concepts that make possible language entry transitions, it seems as though inferentialist moral realists must submit that a moral concept such as 'good' also shows these two characteristics: reports of the presence of goodness must be caused by goodness—call this the causal constraint—and must be default justified—

call this the justification constraint. Using the realist positions that are currently championed within metaethics as a gauge,¹⁹ though, it is far from clear that inferentialists who would aim to defend moral realism would want to advocate these particular theses.

6.1 Moral observation reports and the causal constraint

Starting with the causal constraint, it is clear that any moral realist who does not promote the causal efficacy of moral properties would leave the inferentialist camp at this point. This includes primarily non-naturalists, but also naturalists who seek to combine their naturalism with theses about the causal inertia of moral properties. This, I believe, is an undesirable result.²⁰ For the sake of simplicity, though, let us bracket this issue here and ask instead how those inferentialist moral realists who advocate the thesis that moral reports are caused by moral properties would react to the causal constraint.

Theses about moral efficacy can be fleshed out in one of two ways, both of which are fully compatible with inferentialism. The first makes the strong claim that moral properties are themselves causally efficacious and that we perceive them through a special, sensory moral faculty. Importantly, talk of perception here is not to be understood metaphorically; rather, the claim is that just as our eyes compute visual input and our ears process auditory input, this special moral organ causally reacts to moral input. Hence, to use Harman's (1977) much quoted example, when we see hoodlums setting fire to a cat, we literally perceive the wrongness of their action and (when sufficiently motivated) feel prompted to utter the words 'This is wrong'. The second way of spelling out how moral observation reports are caused by moral properties is more moderate. This explains that we perceive moral properties, not through some special moral faculty, but in exactly the same way as we detect natural properties. The reason for this is that the former are closely connected to the latter—be they identical to natural properties, constituted by them or supervening on them. Consequently, whenever we detect a causally efficacious natural property that constitutes a moral property—say, we see that the ruffians inflict severe pain on the cat by setting it on fire—we also perceive the corresponding moral property—here, the wrongness of their action.

Were inferentialist moral realists to adopt the strong reading of causal efficacy, I take it that inferentialist expressivists would indeed strongly object. Postulating such

¹⁹ Bearing in mind that inferentialist metaethics is a very young movement, these realist positions generally do not proceed from an inferentialist basis. However, it is fair to assume that certain stances on metaethical questions which have been defended within non-inferentialist moral realism and which remain unaffected by the adoption of an inferentialist theory of meaning also carry over to inferentialist moral realism. Consequently, I take certain views of non-inferentialist moral realists as indicators for how inferentialist moral realists may want flesh out their position. The same goes for inferentialist expressivism.

²⁰ The beauty of moral realism's traditional definition in terms of moral facts is its neutrality towards its different versions: Naturalists, non-naturalists, foundationalists, coherentists etc. can all find themselves united under this realist roof. In contrast, the inferentialist construal of moral realism discussed here inscribes substantial metaethical theses into the very definition of moral realism. Although this might capture the view of some realists, it inevitably disenfranchises others. Having said as much, this is not just a downside of inferentialism. Other proposals, such as certain Eleatic accounts, share this drawback.

a moral sense, we can hear them say, clearly contradicts science, as no scientific study has ever identified such a mysterious moral sense organ. In expressivist eyes, then, the first take on causal efficacy fails Price's (2013: 6) validity test: science simply does not back it up. If so, the disagreement criterion, demanding that metaethical differences be re-established, would indeed be fulfilled. However, the problem is that although it would not be inconsistent for an inferentialist moral realist to adopt the strong reading of causal efficacy, most realists would choose to side with expressivists on this matter: they too believe that there is no such moral sensory faculty.²¹ Accordingly, were the inferentialist re-construal of moral realism to impose this very strong moral perception thesis on inferentialists who want to be moral realists, the acceptability criterion would be violated: many moral realists simply would not want to be pinned down to this view.

Instead, most moral realists—interestingly, naturalists and non-naturalists²² are often united in this respect—would choose to pursue the second, scientifically more respectable response to the causality constraint which avoids postulation of some special causal moral faculty. However, whilst this more moderate route assuages worries about the acceptability criterion, trouble looms from the disagreement criterion. For, inferentialist expressivists can fully agree with inferentialist moral realists that moral properties cause moral observation reports in this more moderate sense. To elaborate, the second approach to the causality constraint relies heavily on the claim that moral properties such as wrongness are, in some sense or other, nothing over and above natural properties such as causing pain. However, inferentialist expressivists will emphasise that identifying the moral property of wrongness with the natural property of inflicting pain, say, is to take up a first-order moral standpoint that makes a substantive moral claim as to what wrongness comprises. Accordingly, since inferentialist expressivists can, when wearing their moral hats, concur that moral wrongness consists in the infliction of pain, it would be neither here nor there for them to debate whether our moral reaction to the hoodlums is triggered by wrongness or by the visible infliction of pain. Hence, although this weaker path to the causal constraint ensures that the acceptability criterion is met—realists do indeed advocate this take on the causal efficacy of moral properties—its moderate nature brings inferentialist expressivists back on board. The disagreement criterion is, therefore, again violated. Since both parties can agree that moral observation reports voice reliable discriminative reactions to an environmental circumstance in this weak sense, no metaethical differences are saved.

6.2 Moral observation reports and the justification constraint

Turning to the justification constraint, we must again be careful to distinguish between two possible readings of the thesis that moral observation reports are default justified. The first maintains that there are certain moral claims which form the start of justificatory moral chains without standing in need of inferential justification them-

²¹ We must distinguish between sensory and rational faculties. Several moral realists endorse the claim that we gain moral knowledge through rational faculties (e.g. Audi 2010). Since this is not a causal thesis, I do not discuss it here.

²² Reference to non-naturalists might be surprising here, given their stance on causal efficacy. Still, see for instance Enoch's (2011: 167) proposal of a third-factor explanation.

selves. This view generally goes under the heading of epistemological foundationalism, with the notion of self-evidence also making frequent appearances in this context. Now, some inferentialist moral realists (and, indeed, expressivists) might endorse this foundationalist view; others might not. Be that as it may, this first interpretation of the justification constraint is not the correct reading for our purposes. To remind ourselves, what it means for observation reports to be default justified is that the reporting use of observational terms by a competent observer is generally free: in normal circumstances, the report of the presence of a red object, say, carries a degree of authority that entitles us to the claim that there is something red *without* having to provide any *further* reason as to why there is a red object. Accordingly, in order to satisfy the justification constraint, the same authority must also attach to moral observation reports. That is, when asked why I believe that the ruffians act wrongly, responding ‘I can see it’ would have to qualify as a sufficient answer—no further reasons as to why they act wrongly would need to be cited. Now, some inferentialist moral realists might be willing to attribute such authority to moral observation reports.²³ However, I take it that many would choose not to. Moral authority, they would say, is not exhausted by being a reliable detector of goodness or wrongness. Rather, in order to gain authority, moral observation reports must be supplemented with the provision of *further* reasons as to *why* the thugs act wrongly—the least I must be able to say is that the hoodlums act wrongly because they cause the cat a lot of pain.²⁴ To avoid misunderstanding, I do not intend to suggest here that it is inconsistent to maintain that moral observation reports are default justified, nor that it would be incompatible with moral realism or indeed inferentialism to do so. Rather, my point pertains once more to the acceptability criterion: Were inferentialists to carve theses about the default authority of moral observation reports into the very definition of moral realism, many inferentialists who see themselves as moral realists would fall by the wayside.

However, more bad news awaits inferentialists when we turn to the disagreement criterion. For, even if inferentialist moral realists were to endorse the default authority of moral observation reports, it is far from clear that inferentialist expressivists would need to disagree with them *qua* expressivists. Just as inferentialist moral realists appear free to endorse or reject theses about the default justification of moral observation reports, so do inferentialist expressivists. Under which conditions authority attaches to a statement is a normative question. As far as I can see, nothing in expressivism commits inferentialist expressivists to taking up a specific stance on this normative issue. Consequently, there is no guarantee that inferentialist moral realists and expressivists would necessarily disagree on the default justification of moral observation reports. Once more, then, metaethical differences slip through inferentialists’ fingers.

Accordingly, the second horn of the dilemma now comes into full view. Even if it is an open question whether or not moral vocabulary is e-representational, the proposed metaethical demarcation attempt either meets the disagreement criterion but violates the acceptability criterion, or passes the acceptability criterion but fails the disagreement criterion.

²³ For non-inferentialist moral realism, compare McGrath (2004).

²⁴ The EMUs’ (2b) implicitly covers this.

6.3 Where do we stand?

Where do these considerations leave us? We started out hoping that with a little help from EMUs, inferentialists could establish the much sought-after contrast between moral realism and expressivism: Whilst inferentialist moral realists could concur with inferentialist expressivists that moral statements are practical if understood along the lines of (2c), they were supposed to reject the expressivist thesis that moral claims are practical in the sense of (3). Similarly, although inferentialist expressivists could agree that moral claims are theoretical commitments if understood in terms of i-representation, they were intended to reject the inferentialist realist thesis that moral statements are theoretical commitments if understood along the e-representational lines of language entry transitions.

Following discussion of what it might mean to maintain that moral concepts are e-representational, we can now see that as long as the acceptability criterion is fulfilled, this hope is dashed. That is, the most widely accepted interpretation of the claim that tokens of 'x is good' express reliable discriminative reactions to an environmental circumstance, is one to which inferentialist expressivists need not take exception. If so, the differentiation between i- and e-readings of representation cannot fulfil its intended contrastive function.

What about the second alleged contrast between inferentialist moral realism and expressivism regarding the practicality of moral statements? Rather than discussing this issue in full, let me make just one brief comment here. Even if this second contrast survived closer scrutiny, it would not be sufficient to re-build the metaethical landscape. For, although inferentialist moral realism would now be characterised by the *negative* functionalist thesis that moral statements are not practical statements if understood along the lines of (3), there would be no *positive* functionalist thesis that would establish the mark of realism. Put differently, it would now be clear what inferentialist moral realism stands *against*; with the e-representational reading of theoretical status having been ruled out as the realist/expressivist bone of contention, though, it would be totally unclear what inferentialist moral realism stands *for*.

7 Conclusion

Following my arguments, inferentialists face not one problem, but two. Firstly, we have seen that the suggested inferentialist re-construal of moral realism either satisfies the disagreement criterion but violates the acceptability criterion, or *vice versa*. Consequently, inferentialism falls short of providing a convincing account of metaethical debate. If so, inferentialists could respond in one of two ways. Either, they could go on searching for a more persuasive way to re-construe moral realism and save the metaethical differences. Or they could change tack altogether and declare that they no longer seek a *neutral* understanding of metaethical debate, but rather become *participants* in this debate: they would now *side* with expressivists along the lines of the expressivist EMU and *challenge* realists to explain what more needs to be said.²⁵ This alternative might indeed be the promising path to pursue.

²⁵ As he indicated to me, this also now appears to be Matthew Chrisman's preferred way of approaching this issue. I agree with him.

The second problem, though, runs deeper, in that it transcends inferentialist metaethics by affecting the general inferentialist notion of ontological commitment as the mark of realism. To elaborate, I have chosen a very strong notion of ontological commitment by tying it to language-entry transitions which answer the causal and the justification constraints. This choice was deliberate: it should not be easy for a discourse to be ontologically committing and thus qualify as realist. However, despite raising the bar for ontological commitment in this way, we have seen that, when given its most widely accepted interpretation, inferentialist expressivists can agree that moral observation reports overcome it, despite supposedly championing an *ontologically conservative* view of moral discourse. If so, inferentialists again face a choice. Either, they hold that inferentialist expressivism does, after all, present an ontologically committing account of moral discourse and thus collapses into moral realism. In light of the expressivist EMU of moral vocabulary, I do not find this response particularly convincing. Or else they admit that there is more to ontological commitment than language entry transitions.²⁶ If so, a convincing inferentialist account of ontological commitment, just as a persuasive neutral inferentialist re-construal of metaethics, is still pending.

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²⁶ It might be thought that a stronger focus on function might do the trick, stressing that although inferentialist expressivists might agree that moral concepts establish language entry transitions, they would deny that this constitutes their function. I am doubtful that such a wedge can plausibly be driven between these two theses. Instead, it might be more promising to place even more emphasis on the distinction between vocabularies that explicate moves within the inferential game and those that do not do so. Whether or not the expressivist/realist distinction can piggy-bag on the explicative/non-explicative distinction, though, would require further in-depth analysis.

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