

Metasemantics, Moral Realism and Moral Doctrines

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Abstract In this paper, I consider the relationship between Matthew Kramer’s moral realism as a moral doctrine and expressivism, understood as a distinctly non-representationalist metasemantic theory of moral vocabulary. More precisely, I will argue that Kramer is right in stating that moral realism as a moral doctrine does not stand in conflict with expressivism. But I will also go further, by submitting that advocates of moral realism as a moral doctrine *must* adopt theories such as expressivism in some shape or form. Accordingly, if you do not want to accept positions such as expressivism, you cannot defend moral realism as a moral doctrine. Similarly, if you want moral realism to compete with expressivism, you cannot accept Kramer’s take on moral realism either. Hence, moral realism as a moral doctrine stands and falls with theories such as expressivism, or so I shall argue.

Keywords Minimalist Moral Realism • Metasemantics • Expressivism • Non-Representationalism • Metaethics

1 Introduction

When I first read Matthew Kramer’s *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine* together with the works of kindred spirits, I was rather taken aback. Could it be that when I had been thinking about metaethical issues, such as the existence of moral facts, the possibility of moral knowledge, the action-guiding character of moral judgements and the meaning of moral concepts, I had really been thinking about *moral* questions? Kramer (2009: 5) certainly appeared to suggest as much when explaining that “there is no fundamental divide between the meta-ethical and the ethical. Meta-ethical theses are distinctive in the specific issues that they address, ... but we should not make the mistake of thinking that their distinctiveness places them outside the domain of substantive ethical principles.”

After a second read, the overall picture looked rather different. This revealed that in declaring metaethical positions to be moral doctrines, Kramer (2009: 12) understood metaethics as pertaining predominantly to “morality *tout court*” which, in turn, refers “to the whole array of correct ethical/moral standards that truly determine the ethical/moral consequences of people’s conduct, and to the diverse categories and proper-

ties associated with those standards.” Understood as narrowly as this, I was certainly happy to agree with Kramer’s moral interpretation of metaethics. Still, two observations puzzled me. Firstly, it was obvious that ‘metaethics’ had traditionally been given a much wider reading than one which would limit its remit to morality’s objectivity, and thus to the existence, nature and knowability of moral truths and facts. Rather, investigations into the meaning and function of moral vocabulary, the mental states expressed by moral judgements and the link between these judgements and motivation, have also commonly been regarded as classic examples of metaethical enquiry. But if Kramer’s moral interpretation of metaethics concerned only theses about morality’s objectivity, which status were we to attribute to these further paradigmatically metaethical enquiries? Would Kramer intend that they too must be regarded as moral investigations, or was his moral interpretation of metaethics supposed to leave them untouched? The second observation registered what appeared to be a striking overlap between moral realism as a moral doctrine on the one hand and sophisticated expressivism on the other. After all, philosophers such as Simon Blackburn (1998) and Allan Gibbard (2003) too have long maintained that defending the existence of moral facts, their mind-independence and knowability amounts to putting forward moral positions which, as *participants* of moral discourse, they are both happy to endorse. As they also never tire of stressing, though, none of this is supposed to stand in any conflict with their metaethical expressivism. But if Blackburn, Gibbard and Kramer agree on the moral interpretation of theses about morality’s objectivity, how (if at all) do their views differ?

A third read, this time featuring one of Kramer’s later papers, shed light on both sources of puzzlement. In *There’s Nothing Quasi About Quasi-Realism*, Kramer distinguishes more clearly between Blackburn’s and Gibbard’s expressivism, by which he (2017: 198) understands an account of the pragmatics of moral discourse, and what he calls their quasi-realism, which he takes to cover the moral defence of morality’s objectivity. Expressivism, Kramer now clarifies, does *not* amount to a moral doctrine, but remains to be understood as a non-moral, philosophical position. More precisely:

[I]f the field of meta-ethics is understood more expansively than I have construed it when I have proclaimed that all meta-ethical doctrines are substantive ethical doctrines [namely, as pertaining only to propositions about the existence, nature and objectivity of moral principles and properties], and specifically if that field is understood to include endeavors such as Blackburnian expressivism, then those endeavors should continue as they have unfolded hitherto (Kramer 2017: 208).

In contrast, quasi-realism as Kramer understands it *just is* moral realism as a moral doctrine, or so he (2017: 204) asserts: “That is, it affirms the objectivity of morality in several different senses, and it does so entirely on moral grounds.”¹ Accordingly, since quasi-realism is moral realism as a moral doctrine, and since quasi-realism is fully compatible with expressivism, expressivist endeavours “are entirely consistent with moral realism as a moral doctrine, and they complement it nicely” (Kramer 2017: 208).

¹ For related thoughts on expressivism, realism, representationalism and non-representationalism, see Tiefensee (2019b).

Again, this changed the overall picture significantly. When first reading about moral realism as a moral doctrine I, like many others, had conceived of it as aiming to add a *new* position to the metaethical landscape that would offer an alternative *both* to metaphysically substantive moral realism *and* expressivism. After all, Kramer and like-minded philosophers appeared to spend considerable time opposing not only metaphysically substantive realist approaches to moral discourse, but also expressivism and its distinctive theses about moral judgement.² However, now I understood that moral realism as a moral doctrine did not even seek to address the same questions as expressivism. Far from standing in competition with it, then, moral realism as a moral doctrine was to be ‘complemented nicely’ by expressivism.

But if so, what exactly *is* the relationship between moral realism as a moral doctrine and expressivism? And in which way, if any, does moral realism as a moral doctrine add *new* considerations to the metaethical debate, or any other debate for that matter? Providing responses to both questions will be the objective of this paper. To the first, I will reply that Kramer is right in stating that moral realism as a moral doctrine does not stand in conflict with expressivism. But I will also go further, by submitting that moral realism as a moral doctrine *must* be combined with theories such as expressivism. To the second question, I will respond that moral realism as a moral doctrine does indeed have new arguments to offer, but that these arguments neither pertain to substantive first-order ethics as traditionally pursued by consequentialists and Kantians, say, nor to metaethical debate as undertaken by expressivists and metaphysically substantive moral realists. Indeed, I will argue that *qua* advocates of moral realism as a moral doctrine, moral realists such as Kramer *cannot* participate in this metaethical debate *exactly because* of their specific take on moral realism. Were Kramer’s understanding the only available interpretation of moral realism, then, moral realism would disappear from the field of metaethical enquiry altogether. Consequently, I will conclude that if you do not want to accept positions such as expressivism, you cannot defend moral realism as a moral doctrine. Similarly, if you want moral realism to be a metaethical competitor of expressivism’s, you cannot accept Kramer’s take on moral realism either. Moral realism as a moral doctrine stands and falls with theories such as expressivism, or so I shall argue.

In what follows, I will concur with many of Kramer’s points. With regard to others, I will confess to uncertainty about whether or not Kramer and I agree.³ And concerning others, I will simply disagree. As such, I will start in §2 by specifying how I understand expressivism and moral realism as a moral doctrine. Whilst I will predominantly follow Kramer’s description of the latter, I will disagree with him about the former’s characterisation by suggesting that expressivism should not be located within pragmatics, but metasemantics. The term ‘quasi-realism’, in turn, I will abandon altogether. How moral realism as a moral doctrine relates to metasemantic projects and

² For instance, see Kramer (2009: ch. 8), Dworkin (1996: 108-112, 2011: ch. 3), Scanlon (2014: ch. 3) and Parfit (2011: ch. 28).

³ Matthew Kramer has since confirmed that he agrees with virtually everything I say in this contribution. Nonetheless, throughout this paper I will flag whenever agreement between Kramer and I seemed in doubt, given certain text passages of Kramer’s published work.

why it needs to be combined with theories such as expressivism will then be explained in §3. Discussion of what follows from this result for the development and success of moral realism as a moral doctrine and the new insights it can offer rounds off this contribution in §4.

Importantly, the conclusions I will draw are not limited to Kramer's specific take on moral realism as a moral doctrine. Rather, they apply to all forms of moral realism which defend a minimalist, discourse-internal approach to moral facts, truths and properties.⁴ To pay heed to this observation—and since 'moral realism as a moral doctrine' is, after all, quite a bit of a mouthful—I will henceforth refer to this family of approaches as 'minimalist moral realism'.

For most of this paper, I will follow Matthew Kramer in his narrow focus on ideationalist expressivism as defended by Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard. At the same time, several of my conclusions concern metasemantic non-representationalism more widely, where this includes ideationalist expressivism, but also non-ideationalist approaches such as inferentialism. Whenever this difference between expressivism and non-representationalism becomes relevant, I will indicate as much in order to make explicit to what exactly minimalist moral realists are committed.

2 Minimalist moral realism and expressivism

Let me begin, then, by explicating how I understand this paper's two protagonists, minimalist moral realism and expressivism. Since I believe that employment of the notions 'minimalist moral realism' and 'expressivism' enables us to express everything that we want to say in this debate, I will drop the expression 'quasi-realism' altogether. The term 'quasi' has been the source of many misunderstandings in the past; hence, there is no need to invite further unnecessary confusion by employing it here.

Minimalist moral realism will be understood as comprising two theses. The first we have already encountered earlier: Claims about morality's objectivity, minimalist moral realists maintain, are themselves moral. Let us call this the 'morality thesis'. The second thesis then concerns the affirmation of specific claims about moral objectivity by declaring that morality is indeed objective. Let us call this the 'objectivity thesis'. I look at these in turn.

Starting with the morality thesis, minimalist moral realists hold that questions pertaining to the objectivity of morality do not concern non-moral, discourse-external queries, but moral, discourse-internal matters. As such, they adamantly reject substantively metaphysical approaches to moral discourse which seek to examine the existence of moral truths and facts, their nature and knowability by appealing to general, discourse-external metaphysical and epistemological criteria such as causal efficacy, explanatory

⁴ As such, this includes the positions of Nagel (1986), Scanlon (2014), Parfit (2011) and Dworkin (1996, 2011). For metaphysically substantive realism, see Brink (1989), Shafer-Landau (2003), Enoch (2011) and Wedgwood (2007). What I will call 'minimalist' moral realism also goes under the heading of relaxed realism, quietism, or even anti-realist cognitivism.

potency or deliberative indispensability, say. Rather, all propositions about morality's objectivity are moral themselves, or so minimalist moral realists submit: They do not amount to propositions which we bring forth from *outside* moral discourse *about* the moral domain, but to moral claims which are to be defended from *within* moral discourse on the basis of *moral* arguments.

As Kramer (2017) rightly indicates, adopting minimalist conceptions of truth, fact, representation and property plays a crucial role in this moral interpretation of theses about morality's objectivity, and it is not hard to see why.⁵ For, if facts are, as minimalists maintain, no more than true statements, and if assigning truth to a statement is conceptually equivalent to asserting this very statement, then holding there to be a moral fact that lying to the electorate is wrong, say, simply amounts to making the moral assertion that lying to the electorate is wrong. Similarly, if properties are the shadows of predicates, then all it takes for the moral property of wrongness to exist is that a moral claim featuring the predicate 'wrong' is true. Finally, if all that is required for a statement purportedly to represent some moral fact is for it to have assertoric form and ascribe a moral predicate to some object, moral statements are clearly representational. As such, minimalism removes any metaphysical overtones from notions such as 'truth' and 'fact' by regarding them not as metaphysically heavyweight concepts, but as useful devices that we employ in language to do certain things that would not be possible without them. Consequently, applying these notions in moral contexts also enables us to do something in relation to moral statements *within* moral discourse, rather than leading us to metaphysically substantive spheres outside of it. Of course, all of this is music to minimalist moral realists' ears. Unsurprisingly then, minimalism about semantic notions is the natural bedfellow of minimalist moral realism.

However, minimalist moral realists obviously do not stop at the moral interpretation of claims concerning the objectivity of morality. Rather, as part of their objectivity thesis they also endorse and defend *specific* propositions about moral objectivity. As such, they declare that there are indeed moral facts and properties, that these facts and properties are mind-independent and that they are epistemically accessible. They maintain further that we do have at least some moral knowledge, that (most) moral questions receive determinately correct moral answers and that we can, of course, err about which moral answers are indeed correct. Hence, whereas minimalist moral realism's morality thesis concerns the moral categorisation of propositions about moral objectivity, its objectivity thesis targets the actual vindication of moral objectivity from within moral discourse. As such, the former explains in which way Kramer and like-minded philosophers are *minimalist* moral realists; the latter explains why they are minimalist moral *realists*.

⁵ Things are not quite as simple as I make out here, as I explain in Tiefensee (2019a). Still, as far as I am aware, all minimalist moral realists adopt minimalism about truth in some shape or form. For instance, see Scanlon (2014: 43), Parfit (2011: 756, n. 295) and Kramer (2009: 261). Dworkin's (2011: 173) position is somewhat less clear, although his take on truth might still be categorised as minimalist.

Note that given the way in which I have introduced this position, minimalist moral realism's defence of morality's objectivity concerns predominantly moral metaphysics and moral epistemology. Kramer (2017: 204), in turn, would also want to add semantics to this list. Without arguing this point here, let me merely register my disagreement: Whilst certain aspects of moral terms' semantics—as, for instance, fixing the specific extension of moral expressions such as 'right' and 'good', say—do indeed concern moral matters, others—including the truth-aptitude and purportedly representational character of moral sentences—do not.⁶ Whenever I speak of morality's objectivity, I will, therefore, predominantly have moral metaphysics and moral epistemology in mind.

Which immediate conclusions follow from this characterisation? Most importantly, we can see that minimalist moral realism is only *partly* a moral doctrine. More precisely, whilst its second, distinctly realist objectivity thesis about moral metaphysics and epistemology is indeed moral, its morality thesis concerning the moral interpretation of moral objectivity, is not. Rather, since the morality thesis is based on minimalism about semantic notions, and since minimalism is not a moral position but one that is to be defended within metasemantics and philosophical logic, minimalist moral realism's dis-

⁶ To provide no more than the slightest of hints about the reasons for my disagreement, let me start with truth-aptitude, which Kramer locates within the moral domain. Indeed, he (2017: 205) not only agrees with Dworkin that “the question whether moral judgments can be true or false is a substantive moral issue, not a distinct meta-ethical one”, but also believes this position to be “uncontroversial” and that “Blackburn would certainly agree with [it].” I disagree and, I believe, so would Blackburn. Firstly, the truth-aptitude of moral statements—together with their assertoric, representational, descriptive character—is to be explained by metasemantics, not by moral theorising. That is, Blackburn's thoughts about the use and function of moral terms do not merely “[alert us] to the fact that the semantics of such discourse are (minimalistically) objective along the lines expounded by quasi-realism”, as Kramer (2017: 204, fn. 16) puts it, but provide a metasemantic *explanation* of this descriptive, assertoric character of moral sentences. Accordingly, when asked how it comes about that moral sentences have assertoric form and can be ascribed truth-values, Blackburn would not provide a moral response; rather, he would explain that moral sentences have this form because otherwise they could not realise their practical function. On the one hand, Kramer (2017: 204, fn. 16) appears to acknowledge as much when explaining that “[w]ere the semantics not objective in that fashion, moral discourse could not fulfill its central functions.” On the other hand, I must admit that I struggle to square this acknowledgement with Kramer's moral interpretation of truth-aptitude. To offer a cautious diagnosis of this seeming mismatch, my hunch is that by locating expressivism within pragmatics, Kramer attributes to expressivism a more detached relationship with semantics than my metasemantic interpretation of expressivism would allow.

Just as theses about truth-aptitude do not fall into the moral domain, it also appears implausible to hold all components of semantics to be moral. To use a particularly clear example, take a quick look at the semantics of 'ought'. Here, we can see that spelling out the general truth-conditions of ought-claims along the lines of Kratzer-style (1981) deontic semantics is not a moral exercise. Quite the opposite: it is widely regarded to be a boon of this semantics that it provides the *same* general semantic formula for moral *and non-moral* uses of deontic operators alike. Importantly, this does not mean that moral considerations are irrelevant for this semantic project. However, they enter the scene only when determining the truth-value of specific moral ought-sentences, namely by examining which moral ordering source is to be plugged into the general Kratzer-style semantic formula. Determining the general semantic schema for deontic operators, though, remains a non-moral exercise. As a result, contrary to Kramer I will predominantly focus on moral metaphysics and epistemology when discussing moral objectivity.

tinctive morality thesis crucially depends on non-moral considerations that are to be put forward and settled outside of moral discourse. Indeed, it is this theme of minimalist moral realism's non-moral commitments which will continue to occupy us for the remainder of this paper.

However, before we can tackle these issues, we first need to clarify how to understand the position of expressivism. Here, three observations are particularly significant. The first concerns expressivism's general characterisation, the second its connection to minimalist moral realism's morality thesis and the third its relation to the latter's objectivity thesis. Much of what I will say in the context of these observations will be familiar to those who are well-acquainted with expressivism. Still, it will be helpful to repeat these insights here in order to achieve a better grasp on minimalist moral realism's relationship to expressivism.

Starting with expressivism's general characterisation, I have already hinted that contrary to traditional understandings, Kramer (2017: 200) suggests that expressivism should not be interpreted as providing a semantics of moral sentences, but as presenting an account of the pragmatics of moral discourse:

That is, instead of aiming to supply an exposition of what moral utterances mean, expressivism should be aiming to supply an exposition of what people do by engaging in such utterances and by articulating them in propositional forms. It should be endeavoring to chart what people achieve at practical levels by suffusing their interactions with moral judgments.

I agree that expressivism should not be understood as a semantic theory. I also agree that considerations about the use of moral vocabulary play a key role in expressivist thinking. Still, despite its being a *pragmatist* theory, I disagree that expressivism should be located within the field of pragmatics. After all, expressivism does not take the semantic meaning of moral assertoric sentences as given and then considers how these sentences are used within our practices. Rather, it examines the use of moral utterances in our practices *in order to explain* what *constitutes* their meaning on the basis of these very examinations.⁷ In short, expressivism is best understood as a pragmatist *metasemantic* theory, which explains in virtue of what it is that moral sentences possess their specific meanings.⁸ As such, it neither suspends judgement on what constitutes semantic mean-

⁷ Again, I am not entirely sure if Kramer would disagree with this characterisation. On the one hand, some of Kramer's (2017: 204, fn. 16) explanations sound as if he came at least close to acknowledging an interpretation of expressivism along these metasemantic lines. On the other, this metasemantic characterisation entails consequences which Kramer seemingly wants to reject. Firstly, these include implications for our understanding of moral sentences' truth-aptness and purportedly representational character as explained in footnote 6. Secondly and relatedly, they concern expressivism's quest for internal adequacy that will be explained below. Accordingly, I suspend judgement on whether or not Kramer would agree both with this metasemantic interpretation of expressivism and the thoughts on internal adequacy as spelt out shortly.

⁸ This interpretation has gathered much support in recent years. As a small sample, see Chrisman (2016, 2017), Köhler (2018), Ridge (2014), Schroeter/Schroeter (2019) and Tiefensee

ing, as pragmatic theories would do, nor aims to attribute literal meanings to expressions, as semantic theories would do. Rather, it explains *why* expressions have these meanings, *why* names have their specific referents and *why* predicates have their particular extensions.⁹

What makes expressivism distinctive, in turn, is how it sets out to answer these metasemantic questions. That is, in contrast to metasemantic representationalism, it does not seek to explain the meaning of moral expressions such as ‘good’ or ‘ought’ in terms of what these expressions represent in the world, say by specifying that ‘good’ means GOOD because it stands in a representational relation to goodness, whereas ‘ought’ means OUGHT because it represents some worldly ought-relation. Rather, expressivism pursues a distinctively *non-representationalist* approach, according to which these expressions have their specific meanings not because of what they *represent*, but because of how they are *used*. As such, ideationalist expressivists, such as Blackburn (1998) and Gibbard (2003), hold that moral sentences have their meanings in virtue of the mental states that these sentences are used to express, where these mental states are non-representational and play a specific role in motivation. In contrast, inferentialist non-representationalists, such as Brandom (1994) and Chrisman (2016), suggest (simplifying greatly) that moral sentences obtain their meanings by fulfilling a specific meta-conceptual role within the game of giving and asking for reasons, which consists in making inferential relations explicit that would otherwise remain implicit. Although my alliances lie with the latter, which of these non-representationalist accounts to adopt will not be important for my purposes. What will be important is, rather, that all expressivist accounts are forms of metasemantic non-representationalism, in that they eschew appeal to notions such as representation, truth and reference when spelling out what constitutes moral terms’ meaning.

Expressivism’s non-representationalism also proves key for our second observation concerning its connection to minimalist moral realism’s morality thesis. As I have remarked in the introduction, expressivists agree with minimalist moral realists that questions pertaining to morality’s objectivity concern moral matters. Yet, besides endorsing the morality thesis, their non-representationalism also provides its theoretical foundation.

To see why, remember that I have just said that the morality thesis crucially relies on minimalist interpretations of notions such as ‘true’, ‘fact’ and ‘refers’. But, we may ask, why should we accept minimalism in the first place? Non-representationalists pro-

(2019b). For semantic interpretations of expressivism, see Rosen (1998), Schroeder (2008) and Wedgwood (2007).

⁹ Although metasemantic accounts do not answer semantic questions, they have to explain what makes it the case that sentences can be modelled along the lines of a specific semantic theory. For instance, whilst we should not expect expressivists to assign specific semantic contents to ‘ought’ claims, we should demand that they be able to explain in which way a Kratzer-style deontic semantics provides an adequate model for deontic expressions, given their expressivist metasemantics. *Pace* Kramer (2017: 199-200), this also means that placing expressivism outside of semantics does not eschew problems associated with the Frege-Geach problem, but rather relocates them to another level. For both points, see Schroeter/Schroeter (2019: 13).

vide an answer: Minimalism, they argue, should be accepted exactly because we cannot understand the meaning of notions such as ‘true’ and ‘refers’ on the basis of representationalist considerations about the property of truth or some metaphysically robust reference relation, but by considering what these concepts allow us to *do* within our language and practices. Put differently, then, minimalism is a non-representationalist theory about semantic notions, just as expressivism and inferentialism are non-representationalist accounts of moral notions. As such, non-representationalism provides the golden thread linking expressivism, minimalism and minimalist moral realism’s morality thesis by embedding these positions within the wider metasemantic framework it provides.

The third and final observation concerns expressivism’s relation to minimalist moral realism’s objectivity thesis. I have already hinted that *qua* expressivists—and thus *qua* participants of *metasemantic* debate—philosophers such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard do not affirm morality’s objectivity. This is not surprising: Since we have already specified in our discussion of the morality thesis that defending the existence of moral truths, their mind-independence and knowability amounts to putting forward moral positions within moral discourse, endorsing the objectivity thesis cannot be part of metasemantic debate, but can only ever comprise adopting a stance in *moral* discourse. Still, even though Blackburn and Gibbard endorse moral objectivity not as expressivists, but as participants of moral practice, expressivism nonetheless aims to explain on a purely expressivist basis what is involved in defending this objectivity thesis within moral discourse. That is, as demanded by what has become known as the requirement of “internal adequacy” (Gibbard 2003: 186), in order to be successful expressivism must be able to account for what moral reasoners do when engaging in moral truth and fact talk, when defending moral properties’ mind-independence and endorsing the existence of moral knowledge.

Given as much, expressivism neither entails nor endorses the claim that there are moral truths. Rather, it restricts itself to explaining that someone evaluating as true that lying to the electorate is morally wrong, expresses disapproval towards lying to the electorate. Similarly, expressivism neither entails nor endorses the mind-independence of moral properties. Instead, it goes no further than explaining that anybody defending the mind-independence of moral properties expresses disapproval of a certain dispositional set-up and approval of an alternative. Nor does expressivism entail or endorse the possibility of moral knowledge. Rather, it seeks to explain (again simplifying greatly) that anybody attributing moral knowledge to someone else attributes a certain attitude to this person, whilst also endorsing this attitude herself. Accordingly, *qua* expressivists Blackburn and Gibbard do not seek to vindicate the objectivity thesis by defending the existence of moral truths and properties, their mind-independence and knowability. Rather, they only ever aim to explain what is involved in defending this thesis by vindicating internal features of moral practice on a fully non-representationalist basis.¹⁰

¹⁰ For difference senses of vindication, see Tiefensee (2011: ch. 6.1).

Which immediate conclusions follow from these observations about expressivism's relationship with minimalist moral realism? On the one hand, we can see that whilst expressivism is compatible with minimalist moral realism, it does not entail it: Rather, expressivism is compatible with moral properties' mind-independence and knowability as defended by moral realists, just as it is compatible with their mind-dependence as championed by constructivists and epistemic inaccessibility as suggested by the sceptic. Accordingly, expressivists *can* but *need not* be minimalist moral realists. Whether or not they are is an open, distinct question that depends on which *moral* positions they seek to defend, not as expressivists but as participants of moral practice.

On the other hand, Kramer has already hinted in his more recent work that minimalist moral realists can be expressivists: Expressivism, he states, complements minimalist moral realism nicely. We have already seen one aspect of this complementary relationship, in that non-representationalism, of which expressivism is one example, provides the theoretical underpinning for minimalist moral realists' morality thesis by supporting minimalist interpretations of semantic notions. However, it is not just the case that minimalist moral realists *can* be expressivists. Rather, as I will argue next, minimalist moral realists *must* accept some non-representationalist theory such as expressivism as the correct account of moral language if they want to preserve their minimalist take on moral realism. Before making my case, though, I first need to say a few more words about minimalist moral realism's general relationship to metasemantic enquiries into moral vocabulary.

3 Minimalist moral realism and metasemantics

So far, I have distinguished between two separate kinds of endeavours: firstly, the *non-moral*, metasemantic project of accounting for the meaning of expressions including semantic notions and moral terms such that internal adequacy is achieved and, secondly, the *moral* project of establishing morality's objectivity. Minimalist moral realism is clearly involved in this second project. By suggesting that minimalist moral realists must accept some non-representationalist theory such as expressivism as the correct account of moral language, I presume that they must also take a stance on the first endeavour. But must they?

You might think that our answer should be negative. After all, what makes minimalist moral realism *minimalist* is its opposition to substantively metaphysical enquiries into moral discourse, holding instead that questions about morality's objectivity concern moral, and not non-moral matters. Accordingly, it might be argued that just as minimalist moral realists reject discourse-external *metaphysical* investigations into moral discourse, they should also reject any discourse-external *metasemantic* studies about moral vocabulary. Hence, it could be suggested that when asked how it comes about that moral words acquire their respective meanings, minimalist moral realists should simply refuse to offer a response and declare instead that this is not a question that they, or anybody else for that matter, should seek to answer.

I find this suggestion utterly unconvincing. Whilst I am very sympathetic to the view that nothing metaphysically interesting can be said about morality's objectivity, there must be something informative that we can say about why 'good' means GOOD, rather than RIGHT, TREE or BIG, say. After all, neither are meanings simply brute facts, nor do moral notions receive their meanings "by magic", as Wedgwood (2007: 19) puts it. Accordingly, refusing to engage with metasemantic questions, denying their significance or adopting quietism about meaning, is not a convincing strategy for anybody to adopt. Rather, minimalist moral realists—as with anybody else—must be able to say *something* about the meaning of moral vocabulary. And this 'something' must, of course, be such that it does not conflict with *anything else* minimalist moral realists would want to proclaim about moral metaphysics, moral epistemology and the objectivity of morality.¹¹

Kramer appears to agree. For instance, when discussing Wedgwood's (2007: 19) declaration that it would seem to him "incredible that it could be an absolutely unanalysable feature of a particular thought or statement that it is about one thing rather than another", Kramer (2017: 209-210) does not push back by denying that the metasemantic magic to which Wedgwood alludes would be incredible, but by pointing out that it would be wrong to assume that minimalist moral realism is committed to the unanalysability of moral thought. Similarly, in response to Jamie Dreier's (2004: 35) challenge to fill in the blank in (G):

(E) Edith said that abortion is wrong.

(G) Its being the case that (E) consists of nothing more than _____,

Kramer (2017: 2010) declares:

Dreier chidingly refers to 'lazy theorists [who] might just try [to fill in the blank by] more or less repeating (E).' Filling in the blank by largely repeating E would of course be correct, but no proponent of moral realism as a moral doctrine has to rest content with that stark approach. Equally apt as a way of filling in the blank would be 'Edith's having ascribed to the act-type of abortion the basic moral status that is conferred or would be conferred on that act-type by any moral principle that prohibits abortion.' This latter way of filling in the blank is more controversial than the E-repeating approach—it would need to be defended (on moral grounds) against devotees of moral particularism, for example—but a proponent of moral realism as a moral doctrine can happily adopt it.

Again, Kramer thus appears to accept Dreier's challenge whilst rejecting the claim that minimalist moral realists have nothing informative to say about how to fill in the blank in (G). Still, whilst it should be clear that I fully support Kramer in picking up Dreier's gauntlet, I also believe that he provides the wrong kind of response to the challenge at hand.

¹¹ Compare also Schroeter/Schroeter's (2019: 194) related "generalized integration challenge" at this point, i.e. the "task of providing, for a given area, a simultaneously acceptable metaphysics, epistemology and metasemantics, and showing them to be so."

To elaborate, the most plausible reading of Wedgwood’s and Dreier’s thoughts is, I believe, to interpret them as posing—you will have guessed it—a metasemantic challenge.¹² That is, just as Wedgwood asks us to explain *what makes it the case* that a particular thought is about one thing rather than another, Dreier asks us to explain *what makes it the case* that the sentence uttered by Edith means one thing rather than another. However, Kramer’s response:

- (K) Its being the case that Edith said that abortion is wrong consists of nothing more than Edith’s having ascribed to the act-type of abortion the basic moral status that is conferred or would be conferred on that act-type by any moral principle that prohibits abortion.

does not address this question. Firstly, noting that Edith ascribes the moral status of wrongness to abortion correctly describes Edith’s statement, but does not tell us in virtue of what it is that the term ‘wrong’ means WRONG and refers to wrongness. Secondly, explaining the meaning of ‘wrong’ by appeal to other expressions, such as ‘being prohibited by a moral principle’, might engage in the project of explicating the semantic meaning of ‘wrong’, but again fails to provide a metasemantic explanation of how ‘wrong’ obtains this meaning. To be absolutely clear, then, there is nothing wrong with (K) as such. Still, as a response to Dreier’s challenge, it misses the point.

How, then, should Kramer and other minimalist moral realists respond instead? Here, two alternatives are conceivable. Firstly, they could seek to develop a *novel*, distinctly minimalist-realist metasemantics of moral vocabulary and thus provide a response to Dreier’s challenge which follows neither expressivists’ non-representationalism nor the representationalism that metaphysically substantive moral realists will want to defend. In this case, minimalist moral realists would plant their own, new flag within the non-moral, metasemantic landscape and enter into genuine competition both with non-representationalism as defended by expressivists and representationalism as advanced by metaphysically substantive moral realists. Secondly, they could fall back on *established* metasemantic responses that other metaethicists, such as expressivists and other moral realists, have already developed. If so, minimalist moral realists would not add to the metasemantic debate, nor seek to compete with the metasemantics suggested by others. Instead, they would simply adopt whatever metasemantics is currently on offer that suits their moral defence of moral objectivity best. Which of these two alternatives is it going to be? I have already laid my cards on the table: I believe not only that minimalist moral realists *should* combine their account with an established metasemantic position, but also that they *cannot help* but do so. And this established account will inevitably be non-representationalism as defended—albeit not exclusively—by expressivists.

To see why, let us return to our distinction between the two metasemantic schools introduced above, representationalism and non-representationalism. Representationalists, we have said, explain the meaning of an expression on the basis of the relation that

¹² For more on this interpretation, see Simpson (2018) and Dreier (2018).

this expression bears to what it is about. For instance (and oversimplifying greatly), the term ‘tree’ means TREE because our use of this term is causally regulated by trees; ‘bicycle’ and ‘clock’ have different meanings because they stand for different objects in the world; in order to find out what ‘good’ means, we must discover to which property this term refers, etc. Non-representationalists, we have further said, reject this order of explanation. That is, rather than asking what a term stands for, they submit that we need to ask which role it plays in our language and practices in order to find out about its meaning. As such, ‘true’ means what it does not because it refers to the property of truth, but because of its logical function in language; ‘good’ obtains its meaning not because of its representation of goodness, but because it allows us to express certain motivational states, say; ‘tree’ means TREE not because it stands in a metaphysically robust reference relation to trees, but because of what the use of ‘tree’ commits and entitles us to infer within the game of giving and asking for reasons, where this includes, but is not exhausted by, considerations about our causal reactions to trees. Crucially, as these examples show, non-representationalism does *not* imply that all vocabularies fulfil the *same* function—far from it. Still, whichever role they play, it is this role which explains their meaning.

These two schools of representationalism and non-representationalism are generally taken to exhaust the metasemantic spectrum. Accordingly, minimalist moral realists must join one of them. Due to their own metaphysically lightweight commitments about moral properties, it is clear that this cannot be metasemantic representationalism.

To elaborate, note that by explaining meaning in terms of notions such as truth, reference and representation, representationalism requires that these semantic notions shoulder explanatory weight within our account of meaning. Minimalist conceptions of these notions, though, cannot perform such an explanatory role. Since the minimalist truth-schema “S’ is true iff S’ presupposes that we know what ‘S’ means, this schema cannot be used to explain ‘S’’s meaning. Similarly, if properties are the shadows of predicates, we first need an understanding of the latter before we can make any judgments about the former. And if reference is not understood as a robust relation between words and the world, but is abstracted from meaning assignments so as to make sentences come out as true, reference assignments cannot precede meaning assignments, but must follow them.

In a nutshell, then, since representationalism requires semantic notions to feature in explanations of meaning, and since minimalist semantic notions cannot fulfil such an explanatory role, representationalism presupposes substantive conceptions of truth, reference and properties. Yet, we said earlier that minimalist moral realists reject any such substantive interpretations by supporting minimalism about semantic properties. Accordingly, minimalist moral realists cannot be representationalists about moral vocabulary. Instead, they must join expressivists in being metasemantic non-representationalists.

Still, you might think that this does not quite settle the matter of minimalist moral realists’ metasemantic position. After all, as I have indicated above, non-representationalists never tire of stressing that different vocabularies fulfil different

functions, such that the notion ‘tree’, for instance, plays a very different role within our language and practices than the term ‘true’, say. Moreover, I have hinted that when spelling out the conceptual role of ‘tree’, we must take into account our disposition to react to trees, whereas we need not include any such disposition to react to the property of truth when specifying the logical function of ‘true’. Accordingly, could we not declare, *within* non-representationalism, that those vocabularies which work like ‘tree’ fulfil a specifically *representational* function, whereas those which function more like ‘true’ fulfil a *non-representational* role? Furthermore, could we not use this distinction to drive a wedge between minimalist moral realism and expressivism, in that minimalist moral realists could assimilate the function of moral terms such as ‘good’ to that of ‘tree’, whereas expressivists would declare that ‘good’ functions more like ‘true’—and do all of this *within* the general metasemantics of non-representationalism?

The answer to the first question is ‘Yes’; however, that to the second is ‘No’. More precisely, we can indeed introduce within the general approach of non-representationalism the distinction between representational and non-representational vocabularies as roughly suggested here. However, even if this is so, minimalist moral realists cannot assign moral vocabulary to the representational category. Again, it is their commitment to minimalism which explains why. To elaborate, note that all assertions qualify as being representational if ‘representational’ is given a minimalist reading: Mathematical assertions truly or falsely represent what mathematical reality is like; aesthetic statements truly or false represent the aesthetic properties of our surroundings; empirical and moral assertions truly or falsely represent what the natural and moral worlds are like respectively, and so on. *Minimalist* representation, then, cannot sort assertoric sentences into those which fulfil a representational function and those whose function is non-representational. Hence, if having a representational function is to make it possible to distinguish between vocabularies that perform this function and those that do not, ‘representation’ must be given a more substantive reading than minimalism about representation allows.¹³ What exactly this substantive sense of representation involves need not concern us here.¹⁴ Rather, it is sufficient to point out that by presupposing *some* substantive conception of representation, ascribing a representational function to moral vocabulary is incompatible with minimalist moral realism, given its rejection of any such substantive interpretation of moral representation. Accordingly, even if we introduce within non-representationalism the distinction between represen-

¹³ Compare Chrisman (2016: 204, fn. 1) on this point, who explains that “a sentence carries descriptive content just in case its use to make an assertion carries direct inferential consequences about the way reality is. (Roughly, it has to imply that reality is matched by its truth condition, whatever these happen to be.)”, where this ‘matching’ must be more substantive “than the deflationary way of a predicate being true of [an object].”

¹⁴ For instance, it might be fleshed out in terms of causal relations between us and what we describe (Brink 1989), appeal to natural selection (Sinclair 2006), a substantive sense of property which constrains the conceptual role of corresponding predicates (Wedgwood 2007), deliberative indispensability (Enoch 2011), specific explanations of success (Boyd 1989), language entry transitions (Tiefensee 2016), or some other substantive account of description and representation.

tational and non-representational vocabularies—as I believe we should—minimalist moral realists must join expressivists in ascribing a non-representational function to moral vocabulary.

Accordingly, we have now reached the point where we can see not only that expressivism *complements* minimalist moral realism, but also that minimalist moral realists *must* join expressivists in their defence of non-representationalism: Since they cannot withdraw to quietism about meaning due to quietism’s general implausibility, and since they are barred from adopting metasemantic representationalism or ascribing a representational function to moral vocabulary due to their own minimalist commitments about moral discourse, minimalist moral realists have no choice but to team up with expressivists on the side of non-representationalism.

4 Where minimalist moral realism shines

As a result, we now know that minimalist moral realists do not add a novel, distinctly minimalist-realist metasemantics of moral vocabulary to metasemantic debate, but rather must side with expressivists in their defence of non-representationalism. But even if so, could they, *qua* minimalist moral realists, still offer any new insights to these non-representationalist positions and metasemantic debate? Alternatively, could they offer any new insights to any other debate? I believe that our answer to the first question should be ‘No’; however, to the second we should respond with a ‘Yes’.

Starting with the first question, let me begin by noting that even though we have now established that minimalist moral realists must be non-representationalists, this does not settle which kind of non-representationalism they should accept. As considered by Kramer, they may, of course, choose to adopt ideationalist expressivism as advocated by Blackburn (1998), Gibbard (2003) and Ridge (2014). Alternatively, they could opt for Brandom’s (1994) and Chrisman’s (2016) inferentialist non-representationalism, which seeks to explain meaning on the basis of inferential relations. There might also be further versions. Yet, although I lean towards combining minimalist moral realism with inferentialism, which variety of non-representationalism minimalist moral realists should adopt shall not be my concern here. Instead, let me point out that no matter which of these versions they choose, minimalist moral realists will, of course, neither need to accept everything expressivists and inferentialists say about moral vocabulary, nor regard themselves as being barred from making new suggestions as to how these respective takes on moral vocabulary can be expanded and further improved—always making sure, of course, that whatever they suggest will achieve the best possible fit with their specific moral take on the objectivity of morality.¹⁵ Still, when developing these suggestions, they will not, and cannot, do so *qua* moral realists and thus as defenders of moral objectivity. *Minimalist* moral properties, *minimalist*

¹⁵ For instance, I (Ms.) try to do so when presenting a new inferentialist account of evaluative moral notions that seeks to supplement inferentialists’ focus on deontic operators such as ‘ought’ with an inferentialist take on evaluative notions such as ‘good’.

moral facts and *minimalist* moral representation, I have argued above, cannot play any explanatory role within our account of meaning. Accordingly, if Kramer and his kindred spirits offered new suggestions within the realm of metasemantics, they would do so not as minimalist moral realists, but as non-moral metasemanticists whose aim it is to provide the best non-moral account of moral language that is compatible with their moral interpretation of claims about moral objectivity. *Qua* realists, minimalist moral realists simply have nothing to contribute to this metasemantic debate.

This, in turn, has two important implications. Firstly, observing that the minimalist take on moral objectivity necessitates a non-representationalist metasemantics entails that the success of minimalist moral realism depends on the success of non-representationalism. More precisely, if non-representationalist theories such as expressivism *failed* to achieve internal adequacy—that is, if they could *not* successfully account for those propositions about moral objectivity that minimalist moral realists seek to defend within moral discourse—minimalist moral realists could no longer defend both the objectivity of morality and its minimalist interpretation, but would have to choose between them: Either, they could continue to defend morality’s objectivity, but would now have to adopt representationalism and thus a substantive approach to moral facts and properties in order to account successfully for propositions about morality’s objectivity. Or they could cling on to non-representationalism and minimalist interpretations of theses about moral truths and properties, but would now have to declare that these are not objective, but mind-dependent, say. Either way, if you believe that non-representationalist theories such as expressivism fail to be internally adequate, you cannot be a minimalist moral realist.

Secondly, finding that the minimalist take on moral objectivity requires a non-representationalist metasemantics shows that you cannot be a minimalist moral realist and yet hold moral realism to stand in conflict with theories such as expressivism. Rather, you once more face a choice: Either, you can hold that minimalist moral realists’ view on moral objectivity is correct, but must now accept that moral realism cannot compete with non-representationalist theories such as expressivism. Or you believe that moral realism and expressivism do stand in conflict with one another, but must now abandon minimalist moral realism in favour of a representationalist account of moral vocabulary which presupposes substantive understandings of moral facts and properties.¹⁶ Either way, holding moral realism to compete with theories such as expressivism is incompatible with being a minimalist moral realist.

But, we may ask, if *qua* moral realists, minimalist moral realists cannot contribute new insights to metasemantic debate, can they offer anything new to any *other* debate? Yes: For, they have a lot to offer to *moral* debate. Here, I do not have in mind paradigmatic first-order ethical debate as pursued by consequentialists and Kantians, say. Ra-

¹⁶ Whilst certain metaphysically substantive moral realists clearly opt for metasemantic representationalism (Brink 1989, Boyd 1988), the assessment of other substantive realist accounts, such as Wedgwood’s (2007) conceptual role account, is a little trickier. The way I understand him, though, Wedgwood combines this conceptual role account with a substantive account of truth. I ignore these complexities here.

ther, minimalist moral realists can present novel and interesting arguments exactly about those *abstract* questions regarding moral objectivity which, as Kramer (2009: 11) repeatedly stresses, are still part of moral discourse. Accordingly, we should not expect minimalist moral realists to devise novel metasemantic accounts of meaning. Nor should we expect them to present answers to concrete moral questions, such as ‘Is it morally permissible not to treat patients with underlying health conditions?’, ‘Are all equal resource distributions just?’, or ‘Did Boris act morally recklessly?’. Instead, we should expect minimalist moral realists to develop novel responses to abstract moral questions such as ‘Are there determinately correct answers to moral problems?’, ‘Are moral truths mind-independent and if so, in which way?’, and ‘Can our moral beliefs be false when we are in a state of ideal rational reflection?’. Importantly, given their degree of abstraction, answering these questions requires very different arguments from providing responses to concrete moral queries. For instance, when asked about moral determinacy, we cannot simply respond that moral questions receive determinately true answers because it is true that breaking Emma’s confidence is permissible, given that doing so will prevent great harm. Instead, we have to explain—*on moral grounds*—why it is true that claims such as ‘Either breaking Emma’s confidence is permissible, or it is not permissible’ hold.¹⁷ Importantly, providing such moral answers to abstract moral questions is far from straightforward. Accordingly, it is with regard to the development of such abstract, moral arguments about moral objectivity, that minimalist moral realism shines.

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¹⁷ Compare Tiefensee (2019a) for further details on this example.

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