

Saving which Differences? Creeping Minimalism and Disagreement

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Abstract Much thought has been devoted to how metaethical disagreement between moral realism and expressivism can be saved once minimalism starts creeping. Very little thought has been given to how creeping minimalism affects error-theories' disagreement with their metaethical competitors. The reason for this omission, I suspect, is found in the belief that whilst locating distinctive moral realist and expressivist positions within a minimalist landscape poses a severe challenge, no such difficulties are encountered when differentiating error-theories from moral realism and expressivism. In the first part of this paper, I show that this belief is mistaken: Insofar as moral realists and error-theorists are still taken to disagree, creeping minimalism renders their disagreement *moral*, but makes these positions *metaethically* indistinguishable. In the second part of the paper, I present a modified inferentialist solution to the problem of creeping minimalism which seeks to put error-theories back on the metaethical map. Yet, this too comes at a cost, in that it significantly modifies our interpretation of error-theories. Whichever way we turn, then, creeping minimalism not only forces us to *re-phrase* metaethical positions in a way that is compatible with minimalism, but also requires us to *change* our very understanding of these positions.

Keywords Creeping Minimalism • Metaethics • Moral Realism • Error-Theories • Inferentialism

1 Introduction

Much thought has been devoted to how metaethical disagreement between moral realism and expressivism can be saved once minimalism starts creeping.¹ Very little thought has been given to how creeping minimalism affects error-theories' disagreement with their metaethical competitors.² The reason for this omission, I suspect, is found in the belief that whilst locating distinctive moral realist and expressivist positions within a

¹ For instance, see O'Leary-Hawthorne/Price (1996), Lenman (2003), Dreier (2004), Harcourt (2005), Ridge (2006), Sinclair (2006), Chrisman (2008, 2011), Asay (2013), Golub (2017), and some of the global pragmatism debate (Price 2013).

² The same holds true for the fourth metaethical position, constructivism. Space limitations prohibit me from exploring how minimalism might affect constructivism here.

minimalist landscape poses a severe challenge, no such difficulties are encountered when differentiating error-theories from moral realism and expressivism. In the first part of this paper, I show that this belief is mistaken: Insofar as moral realists and error-theorists are still taken to disagree, creeping minimalism renders their disagreement *moral*, but makes these positions *metaethically* indistinguishable. This is a result that error-theorists will find hard, if not impossible, to accept. In the second part of the paper, I will, therefore, present a modified solution to the problem of creeping minimalism which aims to re-establish moral realists and error-theorists as metaethical, not moral opponents. Yet, whilst this move puts error-theories back on the metaethical map, it too comes at a considerable cost, in that it leads to a significant modification in our interpretation of error-theories. Whichever way we turn, then, creeping minimalism not only forces us to *re-phrase* metaethical accounts in a way that is compatible with minimalism, but also requires us to *change* our very understanding of these positions.

I start by briefly presenting the problem of creeping minimalism and its widely-supported solution regarding explanations of moral content in §2. §3 adds error-theories to the mix and explains why, given a minimalist background, the arguably most natural distinction between error-theories and moral realism entails that disagreement between these two positions is moral, not metaethical. In §4, I argue that whilst this result holds certain advantages, it is highly problematic for error-theories. A modified solution to the problem of creeping minimalism will, therefore, be presented in §5. This further develops inferentialist understandings of expressivism, moral realism and error-theories and explicitly seeks to preserve the intuition that all three positions are engaged in metaethical, not moral disagreement. I conclude in §6 with some general remarks about minimalism's metaethical implications.

For the sake of argument, I will grant that minimalism provides the correct theory of truth, including its ambition to exhaust our analysis thereof.³ Consequently, I will presume that there is no substantial difference between asserting that p and asserting that it is true that p , and that facts are nothing more than true propositions. Rather than being regarded as metaphysically heavyweight concepts, then, 'truth' and 'fact' will be seen as useful logical devices that allow us to make statements which we could not have expressed without them. Responses to the creeping minimalism problem which rely on the *rejection* of minimalism by introducing *robust* notions of truth and fact will, in turn, not be considered for two reasons. Firstly, I take the challenge posed by creeping minimalism to consist in saving the metaethical debate, *given* the premise that the only notion of truth available is minimalist. After all, the crux of Jamie Dreier's own solution to the creeping minimalism problem, which he himself first discussed in 2004, is exactly that it is supposed to succeed *without* having to appeal to robust notions of truth.⁴ Given this understanding of the creeping minimalism challenge, I seek to examine whether or not the same can also be achieved with regard to error-theories' distinctive position. Of course, if our answer were negative, we might choose to reject the premise of this

³ See Horwich (1998), Brandom (1994), Price (1988), Soames (2003).

⁴ The same holds, for instance, for Chrisman's (2008, 2011) suggestions.

challenge and return to more orthodox ways of understanding metaethical positions on grounds of robust semantic notions. However, although this could be where our examination might *end*, it should not be where it *starts*. Rather, before taking this step, we should consider first if, and if so how, metaethical debate between expressivists, moral realists and error-theorists could possibly be saved even if no robust concept of truth were available.

The second reason why I will not consider attempts to establish metaethical distinctions on the basis of robust semantic notions is more general and follows Matthew Chrisman's (2011: 103) point that metaethical positions should fit with our best general theories of meaning and truth. Assume that the best theory of truth was minimalism. Is there an understanding of error-theories that is compatible with minimalism? If so, what does this understanding involve in terms of error-theories' disagreement with expressivism and moral realism? Although the return to robust theories of truth might yet again be our preferred choice if these questions received no satisfactory answer, what we need to examine before resorting to this step is whether or not a convincing response is indeed available. To do as much will, therefore, be the objective of this paper.

2 Creeping minimalism and explanations of moral content

If minimalism starts creeping, deflating notions such as truth, fact, belief and representation, is there any one claim left about which moral realists and expressivists disagree? Many metaethicists now concur that we can provide a positive answer to this question if we shift our focus from semantic theses about the existence of moral truths and facts to the explanation of moral content. For, although expressivists and moral realists now agree that there are at least some moral beliefs which correctly describe moral facts, they will still disagree about how to account for the conceptual *content* of these beliefs and the moral judgements expressing them.

There are different ways of spelling this out. Here, I will focus on only one proposal which has garnered much support in recent years, namely the suggestion that moral realists and expressivists can be distinguished on grounds of differing responses to the *metasemantic* question *in virtue of what* moral judgements and moral beliefs possess their specific semantic content.⁵ This is how expressivists could respond:

(EXPRESSIVISM) *A*'s moral belief that *X* is good has its specific semantic moral content in virtue of the fact that it consists in some conative attitude *A* has towards *X*.

Importantly, (EXPRESSIVISM) does not make any reference to semantic terms such as truth, fact and representation. This omission is deliberate: Eschewing semantic theses is supposed to help circumvent the problem of creeping minimalism. At the same time,

⁵ Compare Dreier (2004), Chrisman (2008, 2011) and more generally the global pragmatism debate (Price 2013). (EXPRESSIVISM) and (MORAL REALISM) are slight adaptations of Dreier's (2004) proposal.

though, (EXPRESSIVISM) clearly presents a positive, distinctive account of moral content. Since this seeks to preserve the characteristic metaethical thrust that has traditionally been associated with expressivism, (EXPRESSIVISM) is thus a very promising attempt to capture this metaethical position against the minimalist background.

Given as much, we might think that the problem of creeping minimalism has been solved: As we have now found a formulation of expressivism that remains unaffected by minimalist deflations, all we need to do to re-establish metaethical differences is to state that moral realists *negate* this expressivist thesis. However, whilst this is certainly one way of meeting the creeping minimalism challenge, it is certainly not particularly satisfying: Although we would now know what moral realism stands *against*, we would not know what it stands *for*. Ideally, then, we also want to arrive at a positive characterisation of moral realism. Here is one proposal:

(MORAL REALISM) \mathcal{A} 's moral belief that X is good has its specific semantic moral content in virtue of the fact that \mathcal{A} stands in a doxastic relation to goodness.

(MORAL REALISM) shares with (EXPRESSIVISM) the important feature that the deflated concepts of truth, fact and representation are no longer mentioned. As such, the hope is that by shifting focus from theses about truths and facts to metasemantic considerations, it too remains unaffected by creeping minimalism.⁶ At the same time, (MORAL REALISM) is taken to be distinctly realist, as it continues to insist that we cannot satisfactorily account for moral content unless we use moral predicates such as 'good' and appeal to our relation to moral properties. Given these modified understandings of moral realism and expressivism, then, the creeping minimalism challenges appears to be met: Metaethical differences seem safe even if minimalism holds.

3 An easy distinction?

This metasemantic solution of the creeping minimalism problem is, I believe, very promising. However, it does not fully succeed. For contrary to what has been suggested above, (MORAL REALISM) is not distinctly realist—at least not as it stands. The simple reason for this is that error-theorists agree with it: Although they deny that any moral claim is ever true, they too advocate a certain *representational mode* of explanation that

⁶ Whether or not this hope is fulfilled depends on how doxastic relations are spelled out. For, is the claim that \mathcal{A} stands in a doxastic relation to X 's goodness not just another way of declaring that \mathcal{A} *represents* X 's goodness? If so, does (MORAL REALISM) once more let minimalism in through the backdoor? Moreover, if (MORAL REALISM) were to ascribe an explanatory function to representational relations, would it still be compatible with minimalism, bearing in mind that minimalism is often taken to *deny* that 'truth' and 'representation' are explanatory notions? Here, I will simply assume that these worries can be assuaged. Recent developments within the debate about global pragmatism might signal how this could be done. For instance, compare Williams' (2013) EMUs as an attempt to capture differences between those vocabularies that have traditionally been understood as being representational and those that have not been so interpreted within a global, pragmatist theory of meaning. See my (2016) for critical discussion.

explains moral content on grounds of its purportedly representational character.⁷ In *this* respect, error-theorists are, after all, on moral realists' and not expressivists' side. Hence, given this metasemantic agreement between moral realists and error-theorists, '(MORAL REALISM)' is, in effect, a misnomer: It does not characterise a *realist*, but a *representationalist* account of moral content, to which both moral realists and error-theorists subscribe. Consequently, explaining moral content representationally can at best distinguish moral realism *and* error-theories from expressivism, but cannot distinguish moral realism *both* from error-theories and expressivism. In order to tell moral realists and error-theorists apart, we thus need to find a second demarcation criterion which establishes disagreement between moral realists and error-theorists despite their agreement on purported representation.

This, though, may look like an easy task. For, even though both moral realists and error-theorists *agree* on the representationalist approach to moral content, they still very much *disagree* on questions of truth and fact: Moral realists hold that there are moral facts, whilst error-theorists maintain that there are none; moral realists believe that moral claims are true, whereas error-theorists deny that this is the case; moral realists take at least some moral beliefs to represent moral reality correctly, while error-theorists insist that despite purporting to represent, no moral belief ever represents successfully because there simply is nothing to represent, and so on. Accordingly, although moral realists and error-theorists agree on *purported* representation and how to explain moral content, they disagree about *successful* representation. And since creeping minimalism leaves this disagreement untouched, it seems straightforward to distinguish moral realism from error-theories even if minimalism obtains.

Metaethical distinctions, then, seem clear: Whilst moral realists and expressivists disagree about explanations of moral content but agree on the existence of moral truths and facts, moral realists and error-theorists agree on the explanation of moral content, but disagree on the existence of moral truths and facts.⁸

(MORAL REALISM*) *A*'s moral belief that *X* is good has its specific semantic moral content in virtue of the fact that *A* stands in a doxastic connection to goodness, *and* at least some positive moral belief is true.

⁷ This would not be the case if (MORAL REALISM) were to be read along the lines of successful, rather than purported representation, as I explain shortly. Yet, such an interpretation does not sit comfortably with the general aim of providing a metasemantic account of moral content. After all, if this account is to succeed, it must also cover cases of beliefs which have moral content but are *false*, and thus cannot be explained by appeal to their *successful* representation of moral facts. Consequently, (MORAL REALISM) should be read along the lines of purported, not successful representation. For similar thoughts, see Simpson (2018).

⁸ Compare also Chrisman's (2008: 353) inferentialist understandings, suggesting that moral realists hold that moral statements express theoretical commitments and that some of them are true, whereas error-theorists submit that moral statements express theoretical commitments, yet that no positive moral statement is true.

(ERROR-THEORIES) *A*'s moral belief that *X* is good has its specific semantic moral content in virtue of the fact that *A* stands in a doxastic connection to goodness, *and* no positive moral belief is ever true.

Now, I agree that this 'easy distinction' is straightforward. I also agree that even in a minimalist world, it is indeed possible to distinguish between moral realism and error-theories on grounds of their disagreement about the existence of moral truths and facts. However, if we choose to do so, we must be aware that against a minimalist background, this distinction is no longer drawn on *metaethical*, but on *moral* grounds.

To elaborate, let us return to minimalism's key thesis, which submits that there is no substantive difference between asserting that *p* and asserting that *p* is true. More precisely, 'The proposition that *p* is true' and '*p*' are taken to be *conceptually equivalent* in the sense that they "are trivial, necessary and apriori consequences of one another" (Soames 2003, 372, 382, fn. 4).⁹ Applied to our case, this implies that

(I) It is true that visiting one's grandmother is morally good,

is conceptually equivalent to the first-order moral proposition

(M) Visiting one's grandmother is morally good,

in that whenever we assert (I), we could just as well assert (M). Consequently, (I) does *not* make any substantial, let alone metaphysical, addition to (M). Instead, 'It is true that visiting one's grandmother is morally good' is just as *moral* a proposition as the corresponding claim that visiting one's grandmother is morally good.¹⁰ Similarly, claiming that it is not true that visiting one's grandmother is morally good, amounts to nothing more than making the *moral* statement that visiting one's grandmother is not morally good.¹¹

What follows from this observation? Firstly and more generally, it sheds new light on our diagnosis of the original creeping minimalism problem. For, although it remains entirely correct to state that both moral realists and expressivists can happily agree on (I) because of the minimalist interpretation of the truth-concept, this is not the whole story. Rather, if theses such as (I) are now to be regarded as moral, any reason why we would expect expressivists and moral realists to disagree about them *qua* metaethicists vanishes. After all, *metaethical* disagreement concerns *external* theses about moral prac-

⁹ Conceptual equivalence is, therefore, not to be confused with the claim that '*p*' and 'It is true that *p*' mean the same.

¹⁰ Compare Blackburn's picture of (1998, pp. 78, 296) Ramsey's ladder: "Because of ... minimalism we can have for free what look[s] like a ladder of philosophical ascent: '*p*', 'it is true that *p*', 'it is really and truly a fact that *p*' ..., for none of these terms, in Ramsey's view, marks an addition to the original judgement. You can as easily make the last judgement as the first – Ramsey's ladder is lying on the ground, horizontal. ... From its top there is no different philosophical view than from the bottom, and the view in each case is just, *p*."

¹¹ Is moral discourse really 'closed under negation'? Even Pigden (2007: 451), an error-theorist, agrees that such a moral interpretation of negations is plausible at least in certain cases. For a different view, see Olson (2014: 14) and Streumer (2017: 124-128).

tices and vocabulary, not claims that are put forward *therein*. Accordingly, as minimalism entails¹² that asking about the existence of moral truths is not to pose an external question about moral discourse, but an internal, moral question, expressivists and moral realists are entirely free to endorse (T) as *participants* of moral discourse without thereby compromising their respective metaethical positions.

Secondly and more particularly, this observation implies that if moral realists' and expressivists' *agreement* on the existence of moral truths is moral, error-theorists' *disagreement* with them also pertains to moral matters. Hence, if their different stance on the existence of moral truths were, as suggested by the 'easy distinction', the only issue which distinguished moral realism from error-theories, the demarcation that we could now draw between them would concern *moral* disagreement only. *Metaethically*, though, they would be indistinguishable.

4 Whose problem is it?

Is this a problem? I think it is, particularly for error-theorists. Before turning to these concerns, though, it is worthwhile pausing briefly to see that this 'easy distinction' and its implications also afford certain advantages. More precisely, it draws our attention to a different and possibly very fruitful way of looking at the disagreement as well as agreement between moral realists, expressivists and error-theorists that re-conceives of the realism/anti-realism distinction as orthogonal to the representationalist/non-representationalist distinction:

<i>Metaethical disagreement</i>	<i>Moral disagreement</i>	
	REALISM There are moral truths and facts. ¹³	ANTI-REALISM There are no moral truths and facts.
REPRESENTATIONALISM Moral content is to be explained representationally.	Moral Realism	Error-Theories
NON-REPRESENTATIONALISM Moral content is to be explained non-representationally.	Expressivism	Irrealism ¹⁴

Tab. 1: Re-locating disagreement

¹² I am speaking loosely here, in that minimalism does not, all by itself, entail as much, but only when combined with independent criteria that classify a proposition as moral.

¹³ More precisely, this should read "There are *mind-independent* moral truths and facts". As I am not considering mind-dependent accounts here, I will stick to the simpler formulation.

¹⁴ I call non-representationalist anti-realists 'irrealists' only for lack of a better term. As I am not interested in non-representationalist anti-realism, I will not consider this bottom-right quadrant any further.

As demonstrated in table 1, the left-hand column captures metaethical disagreement about explanations of moral content, with representationalists and non-representationalists being the two rivals. Given the minimalism-based argument presented above, positions on the existence of moral truths and facts are, in turn, classified as moral, and thus show up within the right-hand columns of moral disagreement. Bearing in mind that it was these positions which originally formed the centre of realist/anti-realist controversies, I suggest that we continue to employ them as foundations of the realism/anti-realism divide also in the world of creeping minimalism. Consequently, being classified as realist—characterised purely as the moral position of endorsing moral facts’ existence—now importantly cuts across the representationalist/non-representationalist divide, which remains firmly located within metaethics. This, in turn, implies that moral realism, expressivism and error-theories are now explicitly understood as the combination of specific metaethical *and* moral theses. It also offers the advantage of grouping all realist and anti-realist positions together, and thus promises to contribute to a sharper understanding of what is at stake within the realism/anti-realism debate irrespective of any disagreement that may or may not exist about metaethical accounts of moral content (for instance, are moral truths really mind-independent, and are there really determinately true answers to moral questions?). And this means that instead of distinguishing between different forms or degrees of realism—some ‘real’, some merely ‘quasi’—, we should discriminate only between *different ways* of being a realist—some representationalist, some non-representationalist.

What shall we make of this new way of carving up the metaethical landscape? It should be music to expressivists’ ears, as it implies that there is nothing ‘quasi’-realist about expressivism: By endorsing the existence of moral truths and facts from within moral discourse, expressivists are as realist as anyone can be. As such, this fully supports expressivists such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, who have long argued that endorsing the existence of moral facts is fully compatible with their position. It also vindicates their practice of distinguishing clearly between those theses that they accept as metaethicists—for instance those about the function of moral vocabulary—and those they endorse as moral practitioners—for instance those about the existence and mind-independence of moral facts.

What about moral realists’ reaction to table 1? Here, it depends on which strand of moral realism we consider. So-called ‘relaxed’ moral realists, who have received much attention in recent years, interpret claims about the existence of moral truths and facts as domain-internal, moral statements, rather than external, metaphysical theses.¹⁵ Whilst it is unclear how they stand towards the theses listed within the metaethical column of table 1, locating claims about the existence of moral truths and facts within the moral domain should thus be grist to the relaxed realist’s mill. In contrast, robust moral realists will be far less happy. After all, their strand of moral realism is called ‘robust’ exact-

¹⁵ For relaxed moral realism, see Scanlon (2014) and Parfit (2011). For anti-Archimedeanism, see Dworkin (2011) and Kramer (2009). For robust moral realists, see Enoch (2011).

ly because they reject the internal reading of theses about moral truths and hold on to their robustly metaphysical interpretation: Without this metaphysical grounding, they maintain, moral objectivity would not be taken sufficiently seriously. Consequently, the ‘easy distinction’ confronts robust moral realists with a choice. Either, they accept their relaxed counterparts’ claim that domain-internal objectivity is all that is required for strong objectivity. Or they must show that although claims about the existence of moral truths and facts are domain-internal, metasemantic representationalism provides all the robustness that they are after.¹⁶

For error-theorists, though, table 1 and the ‘easy distinction’ are truly bad news. Sharing robust moral realists’ interpretation, error-theorists have also traditionally regarded themselves as putting forward metaphysical claims about the fabric of the universe, and not domain-internal statements, when taking a stance on the existence of moral truths and facts. As such, they see themselves as moral realists’ *metaethical*, not *moral* opponents. Add to this the observation that error-theorists hold moral statements to be systematically erroneous, and the result that their position is morally, but not metaethically distinguishable becomes even more damning, as their own theory now entails that its distinctive thesis is just as flawed as the rest of moral discourse. Being told not only that their position should be understood as the combination of metaethical *and* moral theses, but also that it differs from other representationalist accounts of conceptual moral content on *moral* grounds only, will, therefore, not exactly be met with enthusiasm.

If this is right, our investigation has now reached a somewhat awkward interim result. We started out by considering how to differentiate between metaethical positions if minimalism about truth and fact holds. We have found further that the suggested metasemantic solutions to the creeping minimalism problem can distinguish between representationalist and non-representationalist metaethical accounts of moral content, but not between moral realism and error-theories. The ‘easy distinction’ addresses this missing demarcation line by providing a differentiation between moral realism and error-theories on grounds of their opposing theses about the existence of moral truths and facts. Ironically, though, for those who are most affected by it—namely error-theorists—this distinction comes at a cost which they will most likely be unwilling to bear, as it transforms their account from the intended *metaethically* distinctive position of *external* scepticism into the *morally* distinctive view of *internal* scepticism. And this, I take it, is not where error-theorists want to be.

5 An inferentialist suggestion

As I am neither an error-theorist nor a robust moral realist, I myself very much welcome the re-location of metaethical and moral disagreement as presented in table 1 and

¹⁶ Say, by arguing that representationalist realism is robust in a way which non-representationalist realism is not. I leave it to robust moral realists to explain what this alleged robustness is supposed to involve.

thus would not need to be overly concerned with their respective plights. And indeed, how exactly the robustness sought by robust moral realists is supposed to be understood and how it could be defended against a minimalist background will not be my concern here. However, as I believe that even for those who are not error-theorists, it should be of interest whether or not external scepticism about some domain is at all possible, I will consider if there is some way in which error-theoretic stances could be understood as being external to their target domain if minimalism holds. More precisely, how could error-theorists proceed to secure metaethical status for their position if semantic notions are deflated?

One way to do so would be to attack the claim that following minimalism's deflations, disagreement about the existence of moral truths amounts to moral disagreement. If successful, this would show that contrary to what has been claimed above, the 'easy distinction' does not differentiate between moral realism and error-theories on moral grounds, so that our traditional interpretation of error-theories (and robust moral realism) remains fully intact. As I (2018) address and dismiss this approach elsewhere, I will not examine it here. Instead, I will pursue a different route which sticks more closely to the general thrust of this paper, asking if we could save error-theories' metaethical status by showing that they offer a *metasemantic* account of moral content that differs both from moral realist and expressivist suggestions. Given the arguments presented above, this account would have to fulfil three criteria: to differ from moral realism, it must not be representationalist; to diverge from expressivism, it must not be non-representationalist; and to avoid the easy distinction's unwelcome implication that error-theories differ from moral realism only on moral grounds, it must not be based on claims about the non-existence of moral truths and unsuccessful representation.

There are certainly several ways in which these criteria could be met. Here, I will present only one such option by employing an inferentialist theory of meaning which, I believe, allows us to carve out metaethical differences particularly clearly. Moreover, when seeking to identify distinctively metaethical theses about moral discourse, I will specifically look for claims which *mention*, but do not *use* moral vocabulary. The general idea behind this attempt to exploit the use/mention distinction is to copy a strategy which has long been used by expressivists: Although expressivists mention moral terms in their theses about moral discourse, they do not use them, and thus eschew all domain-internal theses about the existence of moral truths and facts within their metaethical account. Consequently, if we could apply the same strategy to error-theories, we might have made a big step towards putting them back onto the metaethical map.

To set the scene, I will first provide a summary of inferentialism and explain how to understand expressivism and moral realism within an inferentialist framework. As with their non-inferentialist counterparts, inferentialist expressivists and moral realists endorse the existence of moral truths and facts. And just as this endorsement amounts to a moral stance in the minimalist context of their non-inferentialist interpretations, it is no less moral within an inferentialist setting. Hence, since this moral component remains untouched no matter whether we consider non-inferentialist or inferentialist conceptions of expressivism and moral realism, I will focus here only on the inferential-

ist interpretation of their metaethical theses in the form of representationalism and non-representationalism. How error-theories can be metaethically distinguished both from inferentialist moral realism and expressivism will then be explained as a second step. As we will see, this re-conception does away with any mention of moral truths and facts, and thus any moral component that the ‘easy distinction’ has ascribed to error-theories. Hence, in contrast to inferentialist moral realism and expressivism, inferentialist error-theories will not be taken to be a combination of metaethical and moral theses, but be located entirely within the metaethical domain.

Let me start, then, with inferentialists’ two key theses. The first declares that the meaning of statements is constituted by their inferential role within the practice of making statements and asking for reasons (Brandom 1994). This is specified, firstly, by the statements and circumstances that license making a particular statement *S* and, secondly, by the statements and actions which are licensed by *S*. The second tenet concerns its distinction between expressive (or explicative) and non-expressive (or non-explicative) vocabularies, where the former’s function is to make implicit inferential commitments explicit, whereas the latter’s is (very roughly) to allow us to formulate our substantive commitments. It is this second tenet which is most relevant for our purposes. For, we can use it to declare that expressive interpretations of vocabularies are to be associated with expressivists’ non-representationalism, whereas non-expressive interpretations thereof are to be linked with moral realists’ representationalism. Applied to our context, this yields the following metasemantic theses:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| (NON-REPRESENTATIONALISM) | Moral vocabulary is expressive. |
| (REPRESENTATIONALISM) | Moral vocabulary is non-expressive. |

What exactly do these theses involve? Despite being in obvious need of further clarification, in the case of inferentialist expressivists’ (NON-REPRESENTATIONALISM), the answer is relatively clear (Brandom 1994): When we look at the intricate web of inferential relations, they explain, we can observe that inferences from doxastic statements, such as ‘Visiting one’s grandmother makes her happy’, to practical commitments, such as ‘I shall visit my grandmother’, are regarded as materially good inferences.¹⁷ The function of moral vocabulary is exactly to explicate these inferential moves: By allowing us to formulate statements such as ‘Visiting one’s grandmother is good’, it enables us to put into language and speak about what already exists in our practices, but has so far remained implicit. Consequently, if there were no such inferences to be explicated, inferentialist expressivists conclude, we would not speak in moral terms.

The answer is not so obvious, though, regarding moral realists’ (REPRESENTATIONALISM). One possible suggestion, which has recently gained some currency, suggests that (REPRESENTATIONALISM) may involve explaining moral vocabulary on the basis of our discriminative reactions to our moral environment, or maybe on grounds of certain explanatory theses (Chrisman 2011). However, for reasons that will become clear shortly, I will not follow these proposals here, but instead want to suggest a

¹⁷ Compare Chrisman (2016) for a diverging inferentialist account of ‘ought’.

broader approach. This consists of the following three steps. Firstly, inferentialist moral realists should submit that inferentialist expressivists wrongly describe our practices when claiming that moral vocabulary explicates what is already an implicit component of the inferentialist web. For, when we look at the vast mesh of inferences, we can observe that inferences from statements such as ‘Visiting one’s grandmother makes her happy’ to ‘I shall visit my grandmother’ are *not* generally regarded as sound, *unless* it is also thought that we are entitled to the claim ‘Visiting one’s grandmother is good because it makes her happy’. If we take away this premise, entitlement to the inference is generally held to collapse. Hence, a statement such as ‘Visiting one’s grandmother is good’ does *not* explicate an already existing sound inference, but provides a premise without which no sound inference would exist. As such, inferentialist moral realists conclude that moral statements are not expressive, but provide *new assertoric input* to our inferentialist practices.

The second step adds to this by pointing out that moral statements stand in very specific entitlement/commitment patterns. To start with, inferentialist moral realists should stress that entitlement to some moral proposition p_m is treated as being inheritable: Whatever entitles Finn to hold that visiting one’s grandmother is good, say—that is, whatever reasons support his commitment—, is also taken to bestow entitlement to my commitment with the same content, and *vice versa*. At the same time, mere commitment to the goodness of visiting one’s grandmother is not regarded as entailing entitlement to it. Even if I believe Finn to be holding that visiting one’s grandmother is good, I do not take this to settle the question of whether or not he is also entitled to this commitment; rather, other reasons must be quoted in order to establish Finn’s (and my own) entitlement to this claim. If so, commitment to p_m and entitlement to p_m can come apart. When a statement stands within this specific entitlement/commitment pattern, inferentialist moral realists should suggest, it is *purportedly objective*.

As a third and final step, they should declare that whenever statements are non-expressive and purportedly objective, they belong to a discourse that qualifies as *representationalist*. (Whether or not this discourse is also realist—i.e. whether or not some of its propositions are true—is once more an internal question which, applied to moral discourse, inferentialist moral realists answer in the positive as participants of moral practice.) Put differently, it is the provision of new assertoric input together with the entitlement/commitment structure of purported objectivity in which entitlement is not only inheritable across speakers, but also detachable from commitment, which suggests a discourse’s representationalist interpretation. And since, according to inferentialist moral realists, moral statements fulfil these two criteria—they are non-expressive and purportedly objective—they will conclude that moral discourse and moral content must be regarded as representationalist.

Importantly, they have reached this conclusion without referring to or presupposing successful representation. Instead, their metaethical theses are limited to purported representation only, where purported representation is spelt out on grounds of specific commitment/entitlement patterns and assertoric input. Moreover, they have developed their theses without even *using* moral terms: By reconstructing inferential patterns and

commitment/entitlement structures, inferentialist moral realists only ever mention moral terms, but never use them, and thus emulate inferentialist expressivists' approach to explanations of moral vocabulary.

This is not to deny that all three steps within this inferentialist realist account face serious questions. Most importantly, inferentialist moral realists obviously need to do more in order to provide a fuller understanding of assertoric input. The inferentialist proposal that has briefly been mentioned above, drawing on discriminative reactions or explanatory theses, can be read as doing exactly that by understanding assertoric input along the lines of so-called language-entry transitions. That is, it could be explained that just as the word 'red' delivers new assertoric input because it allows us to express our discriminative reactions to red things, the word 'good' delivers new assertoric input because it allows us to express our discriminative reactions to good things.¹⁸ Admittedly, this is a very tempting way to spell out assertoric input. However, it might not be the only, nor indeed the most preferable way, as a wider construal of assertoric input which does not appeal to language-entry transitions might provide greater neutrality towards different versions of inferentialist moral realism. To elaborate, the strength of moral realism's traditional definition in terms of moral facts' existence is its neutrality towards different realist varieties: naturalists, non-naturalists, foundationalists, coherentists etc. can all find themselves united under the realist roof. Were we to take theses about language-entry transitions to be the mark of inferentialist realism, specifically when couched in causal terms, we would not only exclude non-naturalists from the realist camp, but also all those moral realists who reject the explanatory or causal efficacy of moral properties. In contrast, the more general thesis that moral vocabulary provides new assertoric input can be shared by all varieties of inferentialist moral realists and allows them to spell out what this involves in line with their respective views, no matter whether they are naturalist, non-naturalist or supernaturalist, and thus emulates the neutrality of moral realism's traditional definition.

Given these opposing metasemantic accounts of moral vocabulary, then, metaethical differences between expressivists and moral realists remain safe within this inferentialist framework. What about inferentialist error-theories? In order to establish error-theories as a third metaethical position, we have said above, three conditions must be met: To avoid the problems surrounding the 'easy distinction', inferentialist error-theorists must give up theses on *(un)successful* representation, and thus any claims about the (non)existence of moral facts. To distinguish themselves from inferentialist moral realists who, as we have seen, still advocate a representationalist theory of moral content, they must not take a stance on *purported* representation either. Hence, in a drastic break with traditional error-theoretic approaches, inferentialist error-theorists should refrain from *all* representationalist theses, be it about successful *or* purported representation. Finally, to differ from inferentialist expressivism's non-representationalism, they must also reject any thesis which assigns moral vocabulary some *expressive* function.

¹⁸ Compare Williams (2013) and my (2016), where I discuss the attempt to develop inferentialist moral realism on grounds of language-entry transitions in greater detail.

Bearing all three points in mind, I suggest that they should adopt the following characterisation of their position:

(INFERNENTIALIST ERROR-THEORIES) The inferential role of moral vocabulary is inconsistent.

Again, inferentialist error-theorists would have to spell out much more comprehensively in what this inconsistency is supposed to consist.¹⁹ Possibly, they will explain that the inferential role of moral vocabulary shows both those features pointed out by inferentialist moral realists and those emphasised by inferentialist expressivists, where—and this is the claim they would have to substantiate—these features are inconsistent. Alternatively, they might seek to establish that when engaging in moral discourse, we necessarily enter into commitments which are contradictory, in that commitment to a moral proposition is held necessarily to preclude entitlement to another. Importantly, though, in whichever way inferentialist error-theorists seek to back up their inconsistency claim, they are no longer putting forward a representationalist account of moral content, as inferentialist moral realists do, nor are they presenting a variation on inferentialist expressivists’ non-representationalism. Instead, they add a third, genuinely new metase-mantic view to our table:

<i>Metaethical disagreement</i>	<i>Moral disagreement</i>	
	REALISM There are moral truths and facts.	ANTI-REALISM There are no moral truths and facts.
REPRESENTATIONALISM Moral vocabulary is non-expressive.	Inferentialist Moral Realism	Internal Scepticism
NON-REPRESENTATIONALISM Moral vocabulary is expressive.	Inferentialist Expressivism	Irrealism
ERROR-THEORIES The inferential role of moral vocabulary is inconsistent.	—	—

Tab. 2: Re-locating disagreement once more

By offering a third metase-mantic account of moral content, table 2 rightly locates the disagreement between inferentialist error-theorists and their opponents within the metaethical column. Moreover, as they are refraining from defending any theses about successful representation, inferentialist error-theories are no longer represented within the columns capturing any moral disagreement. In contrast to inferentialist moral real-

¹⁹ I say more about this in my (2018).

ism and expressivism, they thus do not comprise any moral component, but are characterised by their metaethical thesis only.

Should error-theorists be happier about (INFERENTIALIST ERROR-THEORIES) than (ERROR-THEORIES)? On the one hand, yes. Most importantly for our purposes, this inferentialist construal of error-theories makes it possible to establish inferentialist moral realism and error-theories as metaethical opponents even if minimalism starts creeping: Inferentialist moral realists' focus on purported objective representation and inferentialist error-theorists' inconsistency claim are not only sufficient for differentiating between these two positions, but also do so on grounds of *metaethical* theses about the inferential role of moral vocabulary, not on grounds of any domain-internal claims. As a result, (INFERENTIALIST ERROR-THEORIES) puts error-theories back on the metaethical map. Moreover, since inferentialist error-theories contain no moral components, error-theorists are not committed to advocating any of the moral claims that their own position brands as fundamentally erroneous. Finally, despite no longer mentioning moral truths and facts, nor successful or purported representation—indeed, despite not even *using* moral vocabulary—this characterisation aims to retain the spirit, albeit not the letter, of error-theories by focussing exclusively on inferential relations. That is, whereas non-inferentialist error-theorists claim that the idea of moral properties is incoherent in that such properties would have to be both objective and intrinsically reason-giving, inferentialist error-theorists maintain that moral vocabulary is flawed since no consistent reconstruction of its inferentialist role is available.²⁰

On the other hand, (INFERENTIALIST ERROR-THEORIES) also comes at a considerable cost. For, even though this characterisation seeks to be true to error-theories' spirit, it cannot capture it entirely. After all, error-theories' distinctive claim has traditionally been that although moral assertions *purport* to represent moral reality, they *fail* to do so because there simply is nothing to represent. (INFERENTIALIST ERROR-THEORIES) leaves no space for this claim, although it does retain error-theorists' thesis that moral discourse is fundamentally flawed because it involves some contradiction. Whether or not this is sufficient to preserve enough of the error-theorist spirit, then, is only for error-theorists to decide.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered if, and if so how, metaethical differences between moral realism, expressivism and error-theories can be saved if the only available concept of truth is minimalist. If I am right, we can now see that creeping minimalism not only forces us to re-phrase metaethical positions, but also challenges our very understanding

²⁰ By circumventing all theses about moral truths, this re-construal of error-theories also delivers a further positive side-effect, in that it allows error-theorists to sidestep altogether the charge that rejecting the truth of all moral claims whilst endorsing the truth of all negated moral claims is incoherent (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 2006: 32-37, Pigden 2007: 450-454, Olson 2014: 11-15).

of these accounts and the (dis)agreement obtaining between them. If we choose to follow the ‘easy distinction’ in order to differentiate between expressivism, moral realism and error-theories, all of these positions are now to be understood as combinations of metaethical and moral theses, whilst moral realism and error-theories can be morally, but not metaethically distinguished. This brings certain advantages, but also generates costs, particularly for error-theorists. For those who are unwilling to bear these costs, I have presented inferentialist understandings of expressivism, moral realism and error-theories which re-establish metaethical disagreement between all three competitors. According to this approach, inferentialist expressivists submit that moral vocabulary explicates sound inferences which are already implicit in our practices; inferentialist moral realists maintain that moral vocabulary does not make implicit inferences explicit, but provides new assertoric input without which specific inferences would not be sound; and inferentialist error-theorists hold that we cannot even consistently reconstruct the inferential relations within which moral assertions stand.

However, this inferentialist account also has its price, and again it is predominantly borne by error-theories as it requires not only a change in their letter, but possibly also their spirit. As such, minimalism might indeed have implications that metaethicists more generally and error-theorists more specifically are not prepared to accept. If so, there is, as I have indicated above, always a last option available: reject the premise of the creeping minimalism challenge and abandon minimalism.

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