Three Problems with Metaethical Minimalism

Raff Donelson

Louisiana State University

Metaethical minimalism is the view that first-order moral judgments can be true but nothing makes them true. In a mantra, the minimalist claims that there can be moral truth without moral truthmakers. In what follows, I clarify and motivate this position before articulating three problems for it.

1. Finding and Motivating Minimalism

As I've once observed, for many metaethical theories, the theory can be summarized by recording its answers to three questions, the cognitivity question, the skepticism question, and the ontological question (Donelson, 2017b, p. 293).

> *The cognitivity question:* Is moral discourse truth-apt?
> *The skepticism question:* Do we have moral knowledge?[1]
> *The ontological question:* Are there normative properties?

The minimalist answers yes to the first question, yes to the second, but (more or less) no to the third. Miminalists, which include Richard Rorty (1982), Ronald Dworkin (1996), Hilary Putnam (2004), and T. M. Scanlon (2014), have a strange answer to the ontological question. On the one hand, minimalists speak freely about "normative facts" (Scanlon, 2014) and "do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality... which says that 'there is no such thing' as... Goodness" (Rorty, 1982, p. xiv). But what the one minimalist hand giveth, the other taketh away. Scanlon denies that normative truths are buttressed by "natural or special metaphysical reality" (2014, p. 52). Let us parse this. If normative truths do not owe their truth to *natural* reality or *special* (read: non-natural) reality, there do not seem to be real normative *things* at all. This stance is echoed by other minimalists. Putnam declares that accounting for moral truths by "positing non-natural objects... is to offer a pseudo-explanation" (2004, p. 78). Meanwhile, Dworkin (1996) ridicules those who account for moral truths by positing natural objects. To see minimalism as a coherent doctrine, we must see that its proponents assent to the existence of moral facts only in a disquotational, deflationary sense. According to the minimalist, "Murder is wrong" is true, so, yes, it is fact that murder is wrong. However, the

125

minimalist will not assent to the existence of some wrong-making property that licenses one to say "Murder is wrong."

To understand the motivation for minimalism, particularly the minimalist stance on ontology, we might turn first to an extended metaphor offered by Huw Price (2013). According to Price, there are several alleged truths in one field (call it the *discourse field*) and a smaller number of truthmakers in another (call it the *world field*). The task of philosophy is to link each truth with a truthmaker. For instance, we might see "The cat is on the mat" in the discourse field, and sure enough, we must match this to a cat on a mat in the world field. The challenge of philosophy is to figure out what to do about the apparent inequality between alleged truths and truthmakers. While the world field is only populated by natural facts, the discourse field has a wide array of alleged truths from theological claims to moral claims, from number claims to scientific claims, and much else besides. The figure below illustrates our plight. "AT" stands for alleged truth, while "TM" stands for truthmaker.

Discourse Field	World Field
AT	TM
AT AT	TM
AT AT AT AT	TM
AT AT AT	TM

Price notes three kinds of solutions. First, there are those who pursue an eliminativist strategy. For the eliminativist, some alleged truths are not *bona fide* truths, so they must be crossed out, and once they are, we have equilibrium. In moral theory, error theorists like J. L. Mackie (1977) as well as expressivists like Simon Blackburn (1993) take an eliminativist track. Second, there is the reductionist strategy. For the reductionist, there only appears to be a mismatch between alleged truths and truthmakers, but, in fact, some truthmakers can be matched with multiple alleged truths. In other words, we already have equilibrium. To make this suggestion concrete, for a single natural fact truthmaker, it may be matched with some claim about the natural world *and* a claim about morality. Thus, in moral theory, Cornell realists like Peter Railton (1986) take the reductionist track. Finally, Price notes a third strategy, an inflationist strategy. The inflationists argue that there are more truthmakers than one might have thought; after adding these, we arrive at equilibrium. In moral theory,

moral non-naturalists like Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) are among those Price has in mind for this track. However, one might also see traditional[2] alethic pluralists like Michael Lynch (2009) as offering another way to add truthmakers.

Nowhere do we see minimalism in Price's schema. The minimalist has a unique way to tackle the problem. Instead of solving it, she attempts to dissolve it. The minimalist insists that the mismatch is no problem at all, at least when it comes to morality. She arrives at this view because she rejects as suboptimal all the other solutions. To her credit, there is something suboptimal about the other solutions. Even those most committed to other ways of dealing with what Price calls "the placement problem" have to admit that, in a more ideal philosophy world, we would not have to eliminate moral truth, attempt some non-obvious reduction, or admit of unusual properties. This strategy raises the following question. What are the defects of minimalism, and are these worse than those of its rivals?

2. No Gains

The first step in assessing whether minimalism is to be preferred to its rivals is to take stock of its supposed theoretical advantages vis-à-vis those rivals. As I see it, minimalism has no theoretical advantages relative to an error theoretic eliminativist strategy. Or, to put the point another way, I can see no reason to insist that moral propositions are true, if one agrees with the error theorist that there are no moral properties – not on earth, in Plato's Heaven, or anywhere else.

Often, when we insist that some propositions in a discourse can be non-vacuously true, we aim to shore up theoretical upshots on the semantic, epistemic, or practical fronts. Allow me to illustrate. Suppose we encounter a strange kind of anti-realist, one who claims that ordinary historical judgments are non-truth-apt expressions of taste. This anti-realist does not, however, hold anti-realism about the present or the future. If, in responding to this history anti-realist, we try to argue with her (as opposed to calling in medical professionals), we will try to shore up some things about historical discourse. For instance, we will try to show that historical judgments are just as semantically respectable as are as judgments about the present or the future. They can be true, *just as* these other types of judgements. Historical judgments are not, to borrow a metaphor from Price, "economy-class passengers" (2013, p. 31). In insisting that historical judgments can be non-vacuously true, we aim to draw anti-skeptical conclusions too. We will make arguments to the following effect: if historical judgments can be true, some set of events

made the true ones true, and if that is so, we can come to know which are true by being in the right relationship with those events. Finally, we will insist that because historical judgments can be true and can be known, they deserve some weight in relevant practical deliberations. There are no analogues to these benefits if one is a minimalist insisting that moral claims are true.

On the semantic front, the minimalist would be wrong to assert that moral claims are true *just as* most other claims are true. According to the minimalist, "Snow is white" is true because snow is white, but "Murder is wrong" because.... It should be noted that many minimalists pursue a companions-in-guilt strategy to render their view less jarring (Putnam, 2004; Scanlon, 2014). They reason thusly. If other discourses (often mathematics) also work like this, the lack of truthmakers cannot be a problem for ethics. The mark of the respectable for discourses cannot be linkage to truthmakers, for mathematics is eminently respectable and has no truthmakers. Or so the minimalist maintains. Pointing out the key difficulty with this reply takes us to the epistemic front.

In the example above about the history anti-realist, I suggested that when we insist that a discourse can be true we often have an epistemic upshot in view. We claim that particular judgments within the discourse have truthmakers; these objects we can investigate in order to come to know which judgments are true. This kind of epistemic upshot is not present for the minimalist. Neither knowability nor even hints about how moral judgments are known follow from the fact of moral truth, if there are no truthmakers. If a skeptic asks how we know we aren't just spinning our wheels, the minimalist cannot offer much of an answer.

Furthermore, not only does the minimalist insistence that moral propositions can be non-vacuously true offer no help in moral epistemology, it offers no epistemic help elsewhere. This marks a disanalogy with mathematics. Even if propositions in mathematics have no truthmakers, insisting that mathematical judgments can be true has epistemic benefits elsewhere. It would be hard to explain how mathematics proves so useful in helping us to make accurate predictions in the natural sciences if some mathematical judgments were not true. There is no moral analogue to this open to the minimalist.

Finally, I turn to the practical front. In insisting that judgments in a discourse can be non-vacuously true, we are often trying to offer a reason why certain judgments within that discourse merit our respect when we engage in relevant practical deliberations. It is not clear that the minimalist can enjoy this upshot. Some have argued that the mere fact that a moral proposition is true should not impact our practical deliberations at all, no

matter how we understand moral truthmaking (Donelson, 2017a). This view is, of course, controversial. If we retreat to a less radical view, one on which the truth of a moral proposition can matter sometimes, it is hard to see why moral truth matters when moral discourse is, as the minimalist envisions it, totally unmoored from the world.

3. Proliferation

While the previous section offered what I regard as the biggest problem for minimalism, there are two other problems. The first, which I cover briefly here, is a proliferation worry, previously noted by David Enoch (2011). The problem is best illustrated by returning to Price's metaphor of the two fields. If we abandon the requirement that a discourse is safe from deletion only insofar as it has a truthmaker, discourses and alleged truths can proliferate with nothing to stop them, with no check from the world.

Worries about proliferation are not all equal. The proliferation of nuclear arms is cause for global alarm, the proliferation of items in one's ontology less so, the proliferation of truths perhaps even less so. The problem with the proliferation of truths with no external-world check is that we might have to accept counter-intuitive truths. Enoch (2011) illustrates this well with his example of counter-reasons. He is targeting Scanlon's minimalism with the example, but it applies with equal force to all minimalists. Enoch claims that minimalists have no way to deny that there are non-vacuously true claims about counter-reasons, that is, reasons to do exactly what we have reason not to do. Such things and truths about them both seem dubious, but the minimalist has no real way to block them.

This worry is not supposed to be decisive. It is, however, a theoretical cost, and such costs should only be borne when there are theoretical advantages gained thereby. As the previous section makes manifest, there are no gains.

4. Disjointedness

Most minimalists (Rorty, 1982 excepted) agree that, for most discourses, what I call *the standard model* works. On the standard model, a judgment is true if it has a truthmaker and false or non-cognitive otherwise. Also, according to the standard model, the truthmaker for a judgment not only determines the propriety of asserting p but it also helps to determine that p is what is asserted in the first place. In other words, things outside of language help determine the content of and the correctness conditions for assertoric language. Most minimalists want to say that in a few small cases the standard model does not apply. The problem is that our theory

of language becomes disjointed by accepting minimalism.

Most minimalists do not have a new overarching theory of language to replace the standard model. They merely insist that the standard model, which seems to work so well in many areas, happens to be inapt in some circumstances. This insistence should be seen as a defect of minimalism. To be clear, the defect is not disagreeing with my preferred view of language; instead, the defect is the disjointedness itself. Many find fault with the standard model, most notably, deflationists of various stripes. The criticism I press is one that deflationists too can endorse. Deflationist critics of the standard model do offer a new overarching theory of language, not a disjointed picture on loan from the minimalist gallery.

Like with worries about proliferation, worries about disjointedness are not all equal. Alethic pluralists offer us a kind of disjointed theory insofar as they hold (a) the property of truthmaking is multiply realized and (b) the correspondence version predominates. Truth be told, we might see most versions of minimalism as entailing a version of alethic pluralism. Minimalists essentially say, "Sometimes things are made true by correspondence, and something things are made true by nothing at all." The problem with this kind of alethic pluralism, as opposed to more traditional versions, is that it does not help with giving the content of and correctness conditions for moral judgments. Thus, minimalism bears another cost that a rival theory does not. And again, all for no gain.

Notes

¹ More specifically, the question asks whether we can know that a first-order moral proposition is non-vacuously true.

² I say 'traditional' because, as I explain further on in the text, minimalism, in some of its iterations, entails a non-traditional form of alethic pluralism.

Works Cited

Blackburn, Simon. (1993) How to Be an Ethical Anti-Realist. In *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (pp. 166-81). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Donelson, Raff. (2017a) Ethical Pragmatism. *Metaphilosophy* 48(4): 383-403.

———. (2017b) Rorty's Promise in Metaethics. *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14(3): 292-306.

Dworkin, Ronald. (1996) Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25: 87-139.

Enoch, David. (2011) *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lynch, Michael P. (2009) *Truth as One and Many.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Price, Huw. (2013) *Expressivism, Pragmatism, and Representationalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Putnam, Hilary. (2004) *Ethics without Ontology.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Railton, Peter. (1986) Moral Realism. *The Philosophical Review* 95(2): 163-207.

Rorty, Richard. (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism.* Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Scanlon, T. M. (2014) *Being Realistic about Reasons.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shafer-Landau, Russ. (2003) *Moral Realism: A Defence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.