

Against Quietism, David Enoch

(Please note – this is not a paper, but a part of what will eventually be a book. And it is very much work in progress.)

A number of closely related worries – not so much about realism of whatever kind, as about the debate in which it is one of the competing views – are sometimes grouped together under the heading “quietism”. These worries, applied to the discussion of the normative, include doubts about the intelligibility of metanormative discussion; claims that significant metanormative discussion is impossible; assertions that metanormative debates – if at all intelligible – can only be decided by engaging in first-order, normative discourse itself; claims that apparently metanormative debate *just is* normative debate in disguise; the thought that the practice of engaging in normative discourse (perhaps like other practices) needs no justification that is external to it, and that it is anyway impossible to supply one; and so on.

If these statements of quietist worries are less than fully clear, this is no mere flaw of exposition on my part. Quietist worries – in the metanormative or metaethical context as elsewhere – are rarely put clearly¹. Such worries – sometimes motivated by readings of the later Wittgenstein – are expressed by thinkers from very different traditions, and with very different other philosophical commitments, as different as Dworkin and Blackburn, Nagel and Cavell, McDowell and Putnam, the Positivists and Rorty. These philosophers differ not only in what motivates their quietist inclinations, but also in what they think follows from quietism. Dworkin (1996), for instance – and to an extent also Nagel, Parfit, and Scanlon – think that (what I call) quietist observations serve to vindicate our confidence in our own normative beliefs

¹ See Wright (1992, 205).

and in some fairly robust version of realism; Blackburn (e.g. 1993b) thinks his quietist observations serve to strengthen the case for his Quasi-Realist Projectivism; McDowell (1985) thinks similar points allow for a comfortable middle ground in the realism debate, a metaphysically uncommitted, objectivist yet non-platonist, laid-back kind of realism. It is unclear to me whether the fact that such a variety of philosophers – disagreeing on just about everything else – nevertheless seem to express the very same quietist worries should count as evidence for the seriousness of the worries, or as reason for suspicions regarding their intelligibility or determinacy.

I cannot, of course, discuss all these related worries in detail here, much less can I do justice to the relevant work of all these philosophers. Let me briefly address here, then, just quietist worries that threaten – or may seem to threaten – Robust Realism or my argument for it.

1. Keeping It Internal

Let me start, then, with the “no-vantage-point” intuition. So long as the relevant practice – call the one relevant here “the normative practice” – is itself acknowledged to be contingent, or at least – even if necessary in some way – rationally arbitrary, then I reject the thesis that it needs no justification external to it. Indeed, a view according to which *our* normative practice determines the only criteria of correctness there are is subjectivist in exactly the sense rejected in section ... above². Let me remind you that the argument there was not presented as a complete defense of objectivism. It was designed to show that a subjectivist understanding of normative discourse is actually a misunderstanding, that it misrepresents the commitments of normative discourse. This point is compatible with an error theoretical rejection of

² For a related criticism of Dworkin’s quietism, see Raz (2001, 126).

objectivism. Perhaps, in other words, we cannot get what we want. But this should not confuse us as to the understanding of what it is that we do want³.

A similar point may be made in a more general ontological context. Thus, Scanlon has recently put forward a more detailed ontological discussion⁴, where he argues that in general – not just in the metanormative context – the answers to existence questions are fully determined by the standards internal to the relevant domain, so long as no conflicts are generated with other related domains. Thus, numbers exist, and all that it takes for numbers to exist is that claims quantifying over them are licensed by the internal standards of mathematical discourse, together with the absence of any conflict with some other domain (like the scientific, empirical one). Witches do not exist, because even if claims quantifying over witches are licensed by the standards internal to witch discourse, conflicts *are* generated with the general empirical, scientific discourse (because witch discourse licenses causal claims, or claims that have causal implications). Getting back to the normative, then: All that it takes for normative reasons to exist is that claims quantifying over them are licensed by the standards internal to normative discourse, and that no conflicts arise between normative discourse and the standards internal to some other domain, like the empirical scientific one. But these conditions are rather obviously met, and so normative reasons exist. But, on this anti-metaphysical (or perhaps metaphysically minimalist) view, putting forward this metaphysically-looking claim – that reasons

³ “Philosophy cannot take refuge in reduced ambitions. It is after eternal and nonlocal truth, even though we know that is not what we are going to get.” (Nagel, 1986, 10) Nagel himself at times sounds like a quietist of sorts. I suspect there is a genuine tension in Nagel’s thought about these matters. See also notes 16 and 23 below.

As already mentioned, quietist worries are often associated with Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, and in particular with the rule-following considerations (see the discussion in Wright 1992, chapter 6). So it may be interesting to put the point in the text in terms more clearly relevant to that discussion. If the ideas of following a rule, of a rule *requiring* one thing rather than another, can at best be vindicated by something like Kripke’s (1982) “skeptical solution”, then error theory, not naturalist reduction, has been achieved, for our rule-discourse clearly requires more than that.

⁴ Add discussion of Dworkin MS

exist – just comes down to claiming that some normative statements are (perhaps non-reductively) true. Nothing more metaphysical needs or indeed can be said or done⁵. Such a view is perhaps not quietist through and through: Scanlon does not deny the coherence or even interest of some metanormative discussions and arguments, and he engages them himself. But it is at least quietist (in a sense) about the more metaphysical parts of metanormative discourse.

To see the problem with this way of doing ontology, notice that very little distinguishes this minimalistically realist view of (say) mathematical discourse from some version of fictionalism. According to one such version (roughly modeled on Field's fictionalism), mathematical discourse is committed to the existence of sort-of-platonic abstract objects; such objects do not exist; mathematical discourse is therefore systematically erroneous; but it is nevertheless in perfect order as it is, because it is internally consistent, and has the right kind of relations with other discourses we are interested in (in Field's case, it conservatively extends empirical science). On such a fictionalist view, then, claims quantifying over numbers are licensed by the standards internal to the mathematical domain; there are no conflicts between mathematical discourse and the empirical sciences; and basically, all is well with mathematics (so that mathematicians need not worry about the ontological debate). What, then, is the difference between such a view and Scanlon's? Well, they differ on the truth value of the claim "numbers exist". But at this point it is hard to view this as anything but a terminological difference: Both views, after all, agree that positive existence claims are licensed by the internal standards of mathematics; similarly, both can agree that they do not satisfy some external standard (say, that of causal efficacy). It's just that Scanlon uses "exist" in a way that is not committed to

⁵ In this context, see also Dworkin's (1996) mockery directed at the moron view.

this further standard, and the fictionalist uses “exist” in a more committed kind of way. The difference between Scanlon’s view and this kind of fictionalism, then, comes down to a difference in how a word (though a very important word) is used, not more⁶.

This should already get us somewhat worried – a supposedly realist view that is a notational variant of a fictionalist view seems not to be very realist at all. But we should not treat classifying isms as of intrinsic importance. The more important point is that philosophical objections are almost always closed under notational variance. So Scanlon’s view, we can now confidently predict, is vulnerable to the objections such fictionalist views are vulnerable to.

In the metanormative context, perhaps the most useful way of making this clear is by imagining another discourse (or perhaps another community engaging in it), what may be called the counter-normative discourse⁷. The standards internal to the counter-normative domain license claims quantifying over counter-reasons. Those engaged in that discourse treat counter-reasons much as we treat reasons. For instance, they take them to be relevant to their practical deliberation, or perhaps counter-deliberation, in roughly the same way we take reasons to be relevant to ours: when they judge that there is a counter-reason to ϕ , they tend to ϕ , to criticize those who do not ϕ , and so on. But their judgments about counter-reasons would sound very weird to us (once translated into reasons-talk). For instance, they think that it is rather obvious that that an action will cause the agent pain is counter-reason *for* performing it.

⁶ For more detail on this general point, though in a different context, see my “Epistemicism and Nihilism about Vagueness: What’s the Difference?”, *Philosophical Studies* ...

⁷ What follows is inspired by discussions of counter-induction, and the use to which counter-induction is sometimes put in criticizing analytic and circular justifications (or “justifications”) of induction. Add refs. Add ref to Trsitram McPherson.

Do counter-reasons exist? I think that Scanlon is committed to an affirmative answer here. Quantifying over counter-reasons is licensed by the standards internal to the counter-normative domain. That domain is, we may safely assume, as consistent as our normative domain is. Furthermore, just as the normative domain is not in conflict with the empirical, scientific one (or so we here assume), nor is the counter-normative domain in such conflict. And this, after all, exhausts Scanlon's criteria for existence. So counter-reasons, Scanlon seems committed to concluding, are as ontologically respectable as reasons are⁸. Of course, they are not as *normatively* respectable as reasons are. But then again, reasons aren't as *counter-normatively* respectable as counter-reasons are.

I am not suggesting, of course, a symmetry between reasons and counter-reasons. Indeed, I am insisting that no such symmetry is tenable. Reasons, on my view, exist; counter-reasons do not. But Scanlon's view, I argue, lacks the resources to reject the false reasons-counter-reasons symmetry. And it must therefore be rejected.

I hope the relation to fictionalism is clear. Fictionalist views lack – unless supplemented by other, non-fictionalist elements – the resources to discriminate among fictions: We can tell the normative story, or the counter-normative one. Both are – as far as anything internal to fictionalism is concerned – eligible fictions to be told⁹. Scanlon's view, we just saw, suffers from a similar flaw. And this result confirms the suspicion that Scanlon's view – far from being a fairly robust kind of realism – is really a notational variant of ficitionalism.

⁸ Remember, Scanlon could deny the existence of witches because of the conflicts between witch-discourse and scientific discourse, that arise because of the causal commitment of witch discourse. The point in the text can be made also by noting that Scanlon lacks the resources needed to deny the existence weak-witches, creatures that are much like witches except they are causally inert.

⁹ Of course, perhaps there is reason to tell the normative rather than the counter-normative story. But for this to do the work needed here, this reason – the reason to tell one story rather than another – must be understood non-fictionally.

More needs to be said here, of course. For one thing, more needs to be said about how domains or discourses are to be individuated. Given the centrality to views such as Scanlon's of the distinction between standards that are internal and those that external to a domain, more could be hoped for by way of elaboration of this crucial point. Perhaps, for instance, Scanlon can try to resist the counter-normative domain by understanding it as a part of the normative domain, or by understanding both as a part of some more general domain, or some such. It is hard for me to see how this can be done – certainly, nothing Scanlon says about how domains are to be understood and individuated suggests the details needed for such a reply. But a fuller critical discussion must await here a fuller presentation of the view criticized.

Of course, perhaps I'm wrong, and reasons do not after all exist. The point I want to make here is that the objection to this anti-metaphysical kind of quietism would still survive if that were so. For even if I am wrong in saying that reasons exist and counter-reasons do not, still it seems clear to me that we are *committed* to this being so. In other words, even if the considerations above do not (all by themselves) defeat an error theory, they do defeat something like Scanlon's view, understood as an attempt to flesh out the commitments we already hold dear. In this respect, then, this section ends where it started: The attempt to go metaphysically minimalist, just like the attempt to argue that no external justification for our practices is needed – that it somehow suffices that they are indeed *our* practices – fails to take our normative and metanormative commitments seriously.

2. Skepticism

Perhaps, then, the stronger worry is that, though our normative practice does require “external” justification or grounding, none is forthcoming. Perhaps, in other words,

we are trapped in our point of view, or form of life, or whatever it is that is constituted by our practice, and perhaps this epistemic handicap of ours precludes us from getting the kind of justification that is nevertheless, in some sense, required. This, it seems to me, is not so much a quietist worry as a general skeptical one. To an extent, it is the most general skeptical worry, one that is not peculiar to the normative, and so one that I can be excused from discussing here. But I do think there is an especially serious problem here for Robust Metanormative Realism, and I try to characterize it more precisely and cope with it elsewhere¹⁰.

3. Unintelligibility

Quietist worries are supposed to be distinct from epistemological skeptical ones. Perhaps the point is not that external justification is impossible, not even that it is unnecessary, but that this way of putting things is unintelligible. By asking for such practice-independent justification, we are already trying, confused as we are, to step outside ourselves, look at the universe from nowhere, view everything from no point of view. And, as the last formulation perhaps makes clear, this very attempt is deeply confused, perhaps even incoherent. The idea of practice-independent justification – or any other practice-independent discussion – is inherently confused. Applied to our context, this line of thought suggests that meaningful metanormative discussion is unintelligible. Rather, it is a confused attempt to discuss the normative practice from without, from no normative point of view. And this is just as confused here as it is elsewhere.

I want to make three points in response to this line of thought. First, to the extent that I understand the considerations that tempt philosophers in this direction, I

¹⁰ "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and how to cope with It", forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*.

find them unconvincing. But I cannot hope to discuss this point seriously here¹¹. Let me just note that there is nothing obvious about such claims, that they need to be established, and that I am not sure this can be done (much less am I sure it has already been done). Second, whatever force this quietist intuition has, it has it only in its most global version. Surely, we *can* step outside local, specific practices, and still judge them from within our most general point of view. So local practices can be challenged externally without falling into unintelligibility. And normative practice may be local in this way; at least, it remains to be shown that it is not. So perhaps the metanormative debate can be saved consistently with this most general quietism¹².

Third, I suspect Fine is right when he writes: “the fact that a notion appears to make sense is strong *prima facie* evidence that it does make sense.” (Fine, 2001, 13)¹³:

Consider, for instance, the arguments for and against Robust Realism throughout this essay. Are they all confused pseudo-issues?¹⁴ Surely, they *seem* to make sense¹⁵. And this is strong evidence, I think, that they *do* make sense¹⁶. At the very least – and here

¹¹ Nevertheless, a point I cannot resist making: Suppose it’s true that practices neither need nor have external justifications. Doesn’t this point apply, then, to the metaphysical or philosophical practice itself, and in particular to the practice metaethicists engage in? Wouldn’t it be an instance of philosophical discrimination to subject the practice of metaphysicians to the very kind of criticism one denies is either possible or, even if possible, legitimate elsewhere? For a related objection to (general) quietism, put in terms of self-defeat, see Cassam (1986, 455). Scanlon (forthcoming) mentions this objection, but I do not fully understand his reply to it: He seems to say that either there is no metaphysical domain, or that all that can be said in that discourse are the kind of things that he says, namely, that the truth value of ontological claims is entirely determined by standards internal to the relevant domains; and he suggests that these two ways of putting things come down to the same thing.

¹² Leiter (2001c, 70-71) makes this point as against Dworkin.

¹³ For a similar point, see Zangwill (1992, 160).

¹⁴ Russ Shafer-Landau makes a similar point, explicitly listing some central metaethical questions, in his comments at BU on Dworkin’s manuscript.

¹⁵ A possible claim here is that they *do* make sense, but that they are misunderstood by their proponents as *metaethical*. I take it this thought is central to the quietist tendencies of Blackburn, Dworkin, Scanlon, Kramer, and perhaps others as well. I return to this line of thought below.

¹⁶ Here is how Nagel expresses doubts about claims regarding the unintelligibility of apparently intelligible questions: “... if a demonstration that some question is unreal leaves us still wanting to ask it, then something is wrong with the argument, and more work needs to be done.” (Nagel, 1979, x). On the other hand, arguments like those in the text may not convince unintelligibility-thinkers, for, as David Lewis (1986, 203, footnote 5) once put it, “any competent philosopher who does not understand something will take care not to understand anything else whereby it might be explained.”

I return to the first point above – some strong argument is needed if we are to be convinced otherwise.

4. Undecidability

Perhaps quietism is best understood, then, not as a claim about the unintelligibility of apparently intelligible debates, but rather about the impossibility of deciding them¹⁷. If this is a point about the impossibility of conclusive proof, perhaps it is well-taken (though this too remains to be shown). But in the normative case as elsewhere we have learned to settle for less. And it seems highly implausible that these matters – now admitted to be intelligible – do not admit even of good arguments, arguments that give at least some reason to believe, say, Robust Realism or its denial. Again consider some of the arguments for Robust Realism in this essay, and some of the objections to Robust Realism (such as worries about supervenience, the reliability of normative beliefs, and normative disagreement): Do all of these arguments fail completely, in that they do not provide even the faintest support for their respective conclusions? This seems to me highly implausible, and very strong argument is needed in order to convince us that this is indeed so. (Needless to say, such argument is going to have to be much stronger than any supposed metanormative one, or else the latter's impotence is going to convict the former as well.)

5. It's All First-Order After All

So maybe quietism is best understood not so much as the denial of the intelligibility of metanormative debates or as the claim that no metanormative argument carries any force, but rather as a claim about the nature of such arguments. Perhaps what is

¹⁷ This is what Fine (2001, 13) calls methodological quietism. And I believe Pritchard's (1912) worry about moral philosophy is rather similar. Perhaps this is why he is sometimes thought of as a quietist.

crucial here is that apparently metanormative arguments are really normative themselves¹⁸. What is apparently a detached, normatively neutral meta-discourse is thus folded back into the normative discourse itself. And such claims are supported mostly, I think, by examples of supposedly metanormative issues that can be shown to be normative, or at least to have normative implications¹⁹.

It would not suffice for this kind of quietism that *some* apparently metanormative arguments and issues turn out to be normative ones. Rather, it is necessary that *all* so turn out. So think again of my argument from deliberative indispensability. Is it plausibly considered a first-order normative argument? Or think of challenges to realism, such as the claim that if our normative beliefs are to be justified we must be able to explain their reliability, and that no explanation is possible on realist assumptions²⁰. Is this clearly a piece normative reasoning? Are *all* apparently metanormative arguments plausibly considered normative ones? In the absence of a general argument to the universal conclusion that all apparently metanormative arguments can be nicely folded back into first-order normative discourse, what needs to be done here in order to fully evaluate this line of thought is to go through all of the possible examples, one by one, and see whether they do

¹⁸ This, I think, is the intuition most strongly influencing Dworkin, Scanlon, Kramer, and perhaps also Nagel (when in a quietist mood). In a very different (not robustly realist) way, it is also very central for Blackburn, and perhaps also for Gibbard (after his conversion to quasi-realism). Sometimes such positions are really the combination of several points mentioned in the text. They can state that metanormative questions are good ones when they are understood internally, but that they are confused – resting on a false presupposition perhaps, or maybe even unintelligible or semantically defective – if understood (or "understood") otherwise. Though in certain respects more complicated and subtle, such combined positions are still vulnerable to the objections in the text.

¹⁹ I believe Dworkin's (1996) discussion systematically conflates these two: He repeatedly shows (or attempts to show) that a metaethical issue or controversy has ethical implications, and he then takes himself to have shown that metaethics just is a part of first-order moral discourse. But this, of course, is a mistake: Where I come from (and not only there), religious discourse has political implications, but this doesn't show that religion and politics are one. I think that Kramer's (2009) recent elaboration of this general Dworkinian theme suffers from a similar flaw.

For a characterization of the question regarding the moral neutrality of metaethics – a characterization in terms of metaethics making a moral difference, and one that respects the distinction between inter-discourse implication and identity – see the Appendix in my "How Objectivity Matters".

²⁰ See my "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It".

collapse back into first-order discourse. And clearly, in each case the answer may depend on how liberal one is willing to be with one's understanding of "normative". But rather than going through this tiring procedure, let me note that merely labeling apparently metanormative issues as themselves normative is of little interest²¹. Nothing in the arguments themselves – either for or against realism, robust or otherwise – seems to depend on us using the word "metanormative" rather than "normative" to describe them. And yet, quietists of this type take themselves to have established something of importance when they (take themselves to) have shown that apparently metanormative discourse is itself normative. Why?

I can think of three ways in which it might be thought to matter whether apparently metanormative arguments are really themselves normative, and I want to briefly review them here.

First, such an observation may be thought to support doubts about the intelligibility or possibility of genuinely metanormative discourse. If what seems to be metanormative discussion really is just normative discussion, then, this thought goes, genuine metanormative discussion, one that is not really normative, is not possible. This may be so, but it is important to note that this point does not take us beyond the merely terminological debate: For the soundness of (apparently) metanormative arguments does not depend on their classification as normative or as (now genuinely) metanormative. Perhaps, in other words, no genuinely metanormative discussion is possible (if you choose to use these words in this way), but still there are interesting arguments for and against realism (now considered a normative, not a genuinely metanormative, position), and indeed these are the very same arguments we thought of all along when doing metaethics or metanormativity. But quietists surely mean to

²¹ See Leiter (2001c, 72-3).

do more than recommend a cleaner terminology. So something else – not just support for intelligibility worries – must be thought to be at stake.

A second way in which it may seem to matter if apparently metanormative discussion is really just part of normative reasoning is that this being so undermines, it may be thought, certain skeptical or antirealist worries. For if what seems to be a metanormative challenge is really itself normative, then the skeptic herself makes normative assumptions, and is thus guilty of inconsistency. If apparently metanormative thought is really normative thought then normative thought is unavoidable in a way that seems to undermine any radical challenges to it by rendering them unstable.

This line of thought is mistaken, however, for a reason discussed in chapter ...²². To repeat, then: radical skeptical challenges are best thought of as analogous to *reductio* arguments, employing weapons *we* must concede are powerful against us. The radical skeptic is thus entitled to engage in the very discourse she wants to attack so long as it is a discourse we want to defend. By so doing she will have shown, if successful, that normative discourse undermines or defeats itself. The observation that her doubts are themselves normative, then, does nothing to defend normative discourse. If her arguments cannot be shown to fail for reasons independent of the quietist observation, the quietist observation, far from dealing a devastating blow to the skeptic, marks her unqualified victory.

The third reason why the quietist observation – that apparently metanormative discourse is itself normative – may seem to be significant is that if it is true, there can be no objection, it seems, to the use of first-order arguments and intuitions in order to fight off skeptical or nihilist attacks. Suppose some metaphysical or epistemological –

²² See also my "Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won't come from What Is Constitutive of Action", *Philosophical Review* 115 (2006), 169-198; and then, in greater detail (following replies from Velleman and Ferrero), in my "Shmagency Revisited" (forthcoming).

apparently metaethical – considerations seem to undermine morality altogether, supporting either a nihilist or a skeptical conclusion. Then, it seems, all it takes to refute them is the strength of our convictions that wanton cruelty is wrong, and that we know as much²³. If metanormative considerations were of a very different type from normative ones, perhaps such a move would be objectionable, because of its conflation of two distinct, perhaps even independent²⁴, levels of discourse. But given the quietist observations, this worry can be set aside.

I agree that metanormative discourse may have implications for normative discourse²⁵. And I think there can be no general objection to the use of first-order arguments and intuitions in metanormative contexts²⁶. But nothing like the quietist observation follows. Even if normative arguments are metanormatively relevant, this in on way shows that they are the *only* metanormatively relevant arguments, or that once the normative discussion has been conducted nothing further remains to be said²⁷.

Perhaps there is after all some significance to the classification of apparently metanormative arguments as normative, though I cannot think of one. Or perhaps

²³ “The situation here [in ethics] is like that in any other basic domain. First-order thoughts about its content – thoughts expressed in the object language – rise up again as the decisive response to all second-order thoughts about their psychological character. ... That is why we can defend moral reason only by abandoning metatheory for substantive ethics. Only the intrinsic weight of first-order moral thinking can counter the doubts of subjectivism.” Nagel (1997, 125). For similar points, see Dworkin (throughout his 1996), Scanlon (1998, 63-4), and Kramer (2009, ...).

²⁴ Perhaps this is the line of thought Mackie had in mind when writing: “These first and second order views are not merely distinct but completely independent.” (1977, 16). It is, however, unclear whether Mackie consistently accepts this point throughout his *Ethics* (1977).

²⁵ Sturgeon (1986b, 125) is careful about this point, arguing that even if metaethical theses do not entail – all by themselves – moral consequences, they may, together with relevantly uncontroversial moral premises, entail such consequences. For my attempt at fleshing out the intuition present in Sturgeon’s paper – and for my attempt at spelling out a normative argument for a metaethical position – see my “How Objectivity Matters” (forthcoming).

²⁶ I do know of a general problem in the vicinity here, but it arises in the most general epistemological context, and is in no way particular to the metanormative. This is the problem of easy knowledge. Add refs... With regard to this problem I think we are entitled here to tentatively believe – partly because of its maximally wide scope – that it *can* be solved, even if we do not at this point know how.

²⁷ Have another look at the quote from Nagel in footnote 22 above. Notice that the two appearances of “Only” are entirely unsupported by what precedes them.

something else can be saved from the general (and vague) quietist intuitions, something that survives the discussion above while still constituting a general challenge to my Robust Realism or to the metanormative debate in which it is one of the competing views. But the suspicion now arises that quietist worries are first and foremost expressions of impatience. In the normative context, they are expressions of impatience with semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological discussions that are perceived as merely hindering the real, practically important, first-order discussion. There may even be good historical reasons for such impatience²⁸. In the first two thirds of the twentieth century there was little philosophical interest in substantive moral questions, because (no doubt among other explanations) moral philosophers were busy doing metaethics, which was perceived as prior to – and independent of²⁹ – morality. Morality was perceived as either lacking intellectual respectability, or at least as needing metaethical defense. An overreaction to such thoughts may be what is fueling quietist intuitions in the metaethical context, at least the quietist intuitions expressed by the friends of morality. But this is indeed an overreaction. One need not deny the intelligibility or distinctness of metanormativity (or metaethics) in order to acknowledge the legitimacy and intellectual respectability – already here and now, before the metanormative discussion has reached conclusions that enjoy unanimous support – of first-order normative (or moral) discussion.

²⁸ For a related point in the context of the pretensions for the general power of philosophy, see Fine (2001, 2-3).

²⁹ Thus, there is a significant volume of literature on the question of the ethical neutrality of metaethics. For a characteristic discussion, and for references to many others, see Sumner (1967). Sumner repeatedly considers the possibility that such a neutrality thesis is analytically true of metaethics, so that by showing that any purportedly metaethical theory has normative implications one will have shown that metaethics is impossible. Perhaps this too is an intuition fueling some quietists' worries. But it should not. As the word "metaethics" is used today, nothing like the neutrality thesis is plausibly considered analytically true, and probably not even as merely true. And once again, here as elsewhere, we should replace philosophy with terminology.