

How Objectivity Matters

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Abstract

In this paper, I present a partly normative argument for metaethical objectivity, arguing that non-objectivist metaethical views have highly implausible normative implications in cases of interpersonal disagreement and conflict. This argument – applying to most response-dependence metaethical theories and to expressivist metaethical theories – nicely captures, and vindicates, the philosophical hunch that there *must* be something objectionably non-objectivist about such theories. I put forward this argument for objectivity by presenting and defending a normative principle governing the resolution of interpersonal conflicts, and then proceeding to argue that this principle – together with a host of intuitively non-objectivist metaethical theories – entails unacceptable normative results. In an appendix, I discuss the issue of metaethics' normative neutrality, suggesting an interpretation of it, and arguing that the argument in the main text shows that at least with neutrality thus understood, metaethics is not normatively neutral.

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Let me start with a confession: I suspect that as a psychological matter, I hold the metaethical view I in fact hold not because of highly abstract arguments in the philosophy of language, say, or in the philosophy of action, or because of some general ontological commitments. My underlying motivations for holding the metaethical view I in fact hold are – to the extent that they are transparent to me – much less abstract, and perhaps even much less philosophical. Like many other realists (I suspect), I pretheoretically feel that nothing short of a fairly strong metaethical realism will vindicate our taking morality – or perhaps normativity more generally – seriously. Elsewhere I develop an argument for my favorite kind of realism – the one I call Robust Realism – that is an attempt to flesh out the details of one member of this taking-morality-seriously family¹. Here I want to develop an argument that is another member of this family.

The intuitive idea my argument here will attempt to explicate is rather simple: Metaethical positions that are not objectivist in some important, intuitive sense have – in the context of interpersonal disagreement and conflict – implications that are objectionable on first-order, moral grounds, and should therefore be rejected. The idea, then, is not to look into the metaethical significance of moral disagreement directly², but rather to look into the metaethical significance *of the moral significance* or implications of moral disagreement and conflict. And if I am right, focusing on the metaethical significance of the moral significance of disagreement and conflict can serve to vindicate the philosophical hunch – shared by many, I think – that there *must* be something objectionably non-objectivist about response-dependence and expressivist metaethical theories, that there *must* be some important way in which such views fail to take morality seriously. Because it has been quite hard to turn this

¹ For my argument from the deliberative indispensability of irreducibly normative truths, see Enoch (2003; 2007).

² I do this in another paper (2009).

hunch into an explicit and defensible argument against these metaethical views, the argument in this paper – if successful – may be of considerable interest.

Here is how my attempt at filling in the details of this intuitive thought will proceed. In section 1 I state, defend, and elaborate on the moral principle I will be using in my argument for objectivity, the principle I call IMPARTIALITY. In section 2 I show that a certain caricatured metaethical position (CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM) entails – when combined with the IMPARTIALITY principle from section 2 – highly implausible normative results. By the end of this section, then, CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM – a paradigmatically metaethical theory – is shown to be false (because some of its normative implications are false). In the following sections I generalize the argument and inquire about the scope of its conclusion. In section 3 I argue that the argument from section 2 applies – almost unchanged – to many (non-caricatured) response-dependence metaethical theories. In section 4 I generalize the argument even further, claiming that it applies to expressivist (and related) metaethical positions. In section 5 I discuss ways in which the argument *cannot* be further generalized, and so I state the limited scope of its conclusion. A final section on objectivity concludes. In the Appendix, I discuss metaethics' purported neutrality on normative, moral, first-order questions. I put forward an interpretation of that thought, and claim that the argument of the main paper shows that – at least with neutrality thus understood – metaethics is not morally neutral.

First, though, two inevitable preliminaries, for it is not at all clear what objectivity is (in general, or even just in the metaethical context)³, nor is it clear how to delineate the moral and the metaethical⁴. I suggest that for the time being we bypass both these issues. We can bypass the first by avoiding the word "objectivity".

³ For some discussion, see Rosen (1994) and Svavarsdóttir (2001).

⁴ For some discussion in a relevant context, see Fantl (2006, 25).

Nothing at all in the first two sections – and at most very little in the following sections – will depend on how objectivity is understood. Though the term "objectivity" will not be doing any work in what follows, then, the conclusion supported by the argument developed here can, I think, rather naturally be described in terms of objectivity: I argue, that is, for the objectivity of morality, in at least *one* perfectly natural sense of this loaded word (hence the paper's title). And this, for present purposes, is quite enough. I briefly return to this issue in the concluding section.

As for the moral, the metaethical, and the line between them: I suggest that we avoid this problem by focusing our attention on just paradigmatically moral and paradigmatically metaethical propositions. We can thus postpone for another occasion – to a large extent, at least – worries about more precise ways of delineating the moral and the metaethical⁵.

1. The Normative Premise: IMPARTIALITY

We're spending the afternoon together. I want to go catch a movie I've been looking forward to seeing. You'd rather play tennis. But both of us really want to spend the afternoon together. How should we proceed?

It seems clear that some loosely speaking egalitarian or impartial solution is called for. Perhaps we should flip a coin, thus giving equal chances to the movie and the tennis match. Or perhaps we should take turns – so that you get to choose what we do today, and I get to choose what we do next time we're spending an afternoon together. Or perhaps we should let some impartial spectator decide for us. But anyway, it would be wrong for me to stand my ground, and just insist that we go to

⁵ In particular, I can avoid, I think, discussing descriptive-normative counterfactuals, and how they are best understood.

the movie theater. Doing so – without some rather special further story, at least – would be wrong, unreasonable if anything is. Why is that so?

Here's one plausible explanation. You and I are, in a sense, equally morally important. Absent some distinguishing story, our preferences should count equally. And in the example of this friendly conflict of interests, it is just preferences that are involved. Now, each one of us should acknowledge that we are equally morally important, that our preferences should – other things being equal – count equally. Putting the point Nagelianly⁶, you should be willing to step back, and view the situation as just a situation of a conflict between two persons, one of whom happening to be you; you should be willing to abstract from your indexical knowledge here – that the preference for tennis is *your* preference – and treat your preference for playing tennis as just the preference of one among several, the one who happens to also be you. Similarly, of course, for my stepping back from my preferences. If I choose to stand my ground and just insist that we catch that movie (without offering some further justifying story), I refuse to step back in this way, and so I refuse to treat you and your preferences as equally important to mine.

The point is not, of course, that there is something morally wrong in just acting on my own preferences. If I am spending the afternoon by myself, there is no problem in my going to the movies simply because, well, I want to (or would enjoy doing so, or some such). The point is, rather, about a constraint on the appropriate

⁶ This is a major theme in Nagel (1986; and for its applications to political philosophy, see his 1991). When Nagel talks in the political context about the impersonal point of view (which each person occupies alongside the personal point of view) he sometimes just means the point of view from which people's *interests* count equally, one without which "there would be no morality, only the clash, compromise, and occasional convergence of individual perspectives." (1991, 3-4). At other times, though, he seems to suggest that from the impersonal point of view we also step back from our *beliefs*, including our moral beliefs (1987; And to a lesser extent also 1991, chapter 14). I think Nagel is importantly right about the case of interests, and (at least partly) importantly wrong about beliefs, moral beliefs included (Nagel himself is painfully aware of the distinction between the two cases, and of the fact that it's much harder to justify the latter kind of impartiality (for instance, 1991, 158: "Impartiality among persons is one thing, but impartiality among conceptions of the good is quite another.") But he nevertheless thinks this can be done.). This point will be crucial in what is to come.

way of settling some interpersonal conflicts. And what I've so far claimed is that in cases of conflicts that are due to a mere preference, the right thing to do is to step back in this Nagelian sort of way, and endorse an impartial solution⁷. And the same principle holds, I now want to suggest, for conflicts that are due merely to other attitudes or feelings.

You may be worried that I'm underestimating the normative force of preferences, or feelings, or attitudes. In a somewhat different context, Simon Blackburn expresses a related worry:

“Does the lover escape his passion by thinking ‘Oh, it’s only my passion, forget it’? When the world affords occasion for grief, does it brighten when we realize that it is we who grieve?”
(1993, 176)

There's a sense in which Blackburn is clearly right: Some feelings or attitudes can give me powerful reasons, reasons that are perfectly consistent with my realizing that they depend in some strong sense on these feelings or attitudes being very much mine. The answer to Blackburn's rhetorical question is very much as he expects it to be: The world does not brighten when we realize that it is we who grieve. But in our context, we need to think about another question⁸, we need to think of a case in which grief somehow gives rise to an interpersonal conflict. Usually, when someone is grieving

⁷ Put in reason-talk, this may be either because in cases of interpersonal conflicts of this sort others' preferences too give you reasons (just like your own), or – perhaps somewhat more plausibly – because even though you have stronger first-order reasons to act on your own preference, still you have a second-order reason not to act on that balance of reasons. For my purposes in this paper I do not have to decide between these two reason-talk explanations, because in both of them IMPARTIALITY – the moral principle I am about to get to in the text – does explanatory work. In the second, it is the source of the said second-order reason. And in the first, it is what explains why even though often others' preferences do not give you reasons, in cases of interpersonal conflict they often do.

⁸ Because I am suggesting a different question here, it is not immediately clear that what I am about to say amounts to a criticism of Blackburn. But I think it does: for in their context, Blackburn's rhetorical questions about love and grief are meant to answer a very general worry about his quasi-realism, and they cannot do that if I am right about the other question that follows in the text. I return to Blackburn's metaethics later in the text.

For a somewhat similar response to Blackburn's rhetorical questions, see Fantl (2006, 40).

we should go out of our way accommodating them. So for instance, if you and I are the only physicians in town, and you are grieving, I should cover for you, work your shift, and so on. But now suppose that the world affords an equally serious occasion for grief for *both* of us. In this case, there *is* a sense in which I should step back, just like in the movie-or-cinema case. If I stand my ground, insisting that because I am grieving I should be accommodated, if I am unwilling to see the situation more impersonally, as one where two people (one of whom happens to be me) are equally entitled to accommodation – if, in other words, I am insisting that you cover my shift, then I am acting wrongly. In this sense, then, I *should* step back from my grieving, and it is important that I understand that it is just me who is grieving. The point is not that this fact brightens up the world, or makes the grief any less serious, or takes anything from its reason-giving force. The point is, rather, one about the significance of grief in certain interpersonal conflicts.

I suggest, then, the following moral principle:

IMPARTIALITY: In an interpersonal conflict, when all other things are equal, we should step back from our mere preferences, or feelings, or attitudes, or some such, and to the extent the conflict is due to those, an impartial, egalitarian solution is called for⁹. Furthermore, each party to the conflict should acknowledge as much: Standing one's ground is, in such cases, morally wrong.

Now, perhaps impartiality does not hold in full generality. Perhaps, in other words, one of the ways in which it is permissible for us to be partial towards ourselves is to give extra weight, in some circumstances, to our own preferences compared to those

⁹ The impartial solution called for may be a conditionally impartial one – say, where each party supports an impartial procedure if the other party does.

of others, even in cases of conflict. But for now this doesn't matter. What does matter is that for a large class of cases of interpersonal conflicts, IMPARTIALITY does seem to hold.

Does something like IMPARTIALITY hold when a conflict is due to a perfectly factual disagreement about perfectly response-independent matters? I think it does not, but things are tricky here. Suppose that we've already agreed about going to the cinema, but we differ regarding the best way to get there. We agree that we should pick the quickest way, but we disagree about the facts: you think the quickest way would be to take a cab, while I think the quickest way would be to walk. How should we proceed? Well, it seems that truth – or sufficient reason to believe – makes a difference here, and so one perfectly sensible way of proceeding could be for me to try and convince you that walking would get us there more quickly, and for you to try and convince me that really, we should take a cab. But suppose that we still disagree, and that it seems like there is no point in continuing the discussion. A decision has to be made. What should we do? In this case, I think there is considerable pressure in the direction of an impartial solution of sorts. Perhaps, for instance, we should both agree to flip a coin, giving equal chance to our respective suggested solutions. So in this case, something like the analogue of IMPARTIALITY for factual beliefs seems to hold – we should both step back, view our beliefs as just the beliefs of someone who happens to be us, and so go for an impartial solution.

But I think the example is not clean enough as it stands, and that once we are more careful about some of the details, the analogue of IMPARTIALITY relevant here can be seen to fail. One complication is epistemological. For often when you find out that others who are (roughly) your epistemic peers disagree with you, this is some evidence that you are wrong. Epistemologists differ regarding the appropriate way of

revising one's beliefs given peer disagreement, and I cannot discuss this controversy here¹⁰. But for our purposes here we need to abstract from the epistemic significance of the disagreement – it may be *epistemically* unreasonable for you to stand your ground and continue believing just as confidently as before that the quickest way to get to the movie theater is to take a cab, given that I differ. But it is not *epistemic* reasonableness we are interested in here. Rather, we are to assume that you remain epistemically justified in your belief, and then proceed to ask how you are justified in proceeding *practically*, given our disagreement and (moderate) conflict¹¹.

A second complication arises from the fact that in many real-life cases there are going to be other consequences, and perhaps also other normatively relevant factors, that will bear on how we are to proceed, factors that for our purposes we want to abstract from. For instance, standing my ground and insisting that we should walk (rather than take a cab) may harm our friendship in the future. Or your feelings may be hurt. Or some such. If such conditions hold, then they may give me excellent reasons not to act on what I take to be the truth of the matter (namely, that it's best if we walk).

But let's assume these complications away. Assume, then, that I am right – it would be quicker to walk. Assume further that I know as much, or at least that I justifiably believe as much, and that this justification survives the factoring-in of the peer-disagreement (in other words, assume that even after reducing my confidence to the extent perhaps required given the peer disagreement involved, I am still epistemically justified in holding this belief). And assume further that I can act on my true judgment here without my doing so having any other bad consequences – perhaps

¹⁰ For my own view, and for references, see my "Not Just a Truthometer" (forthcoming).

¹¹ Kalderon (2005, Chapter 1) consistently conflates the epistemic and the practical question relevant to proceeding in cases of disagreement and conflict. This is one of the reasons why his conclusions regarding disagreement (moral and otherwise) are so different from mine.

I know that you are very forgetful about such things, or that you won't really mind. In such a case, it seems to me, it is no longer true that I should step back from my true belief, and support an "impartial" solution. Truth *does* make a difference, it seems to me, but in the normal, messy cases the difference the truth makes may be overshadowed by many other factors.

Another way of seeing that truth does matter here, and so that it's not the case that the analogue of IMPARTIALITY holds for factual beliefs, is to think about cases where the relevant truth is extremely important. In the quickest-way-to-the-movie-theater example, after all, the relevant truth didn't matter that much, and so other normatively relevant factors could outweigh it rather easily. But now suppose we're trying to neutralize a bomb: you think we should cut the red wire, and I think we should cut the blue one. And suppose that I am right, and that I am rational in believing as I do, even given the relevant peer-disagreement. How should I proceed? Well, if much is at stake, it seems to me I should act on what I (rightly, and rationally) take to be the truth of the matter. Perhaps this will offend you, and if so, this counts against my proceeding in this way, and for my opting for an impartial procedure (like perhaps flipping a coin). But this reason is overwhelmingly outweighed by the reason I have to neutralize the bomb, namely, to cut the blue wire (and not flip a coin about it). It seems to me, then, that the thing to do in this case is to act on the relevant truth, rather than on a solution that is neutral as between my true belief and your false one. If so, this strengthens the point from the previous paragraph – truth does matter here, even if it is not the only thing that matters. Sometimes other considerations are more important, and then it may look as if something like an analogue of IMPARTIALITY holds. But in fact it does not, and not even any proxy for IMPARTIALITY holds in general, for sometimes other considerations do not outweigh the significance of the

relevant truth. In fact, in such cases it seems clear that IMPARTIALITY has no weight whatsoever. (And notice, of course, that in the mere-preference cases, IMPARTIALITY delivers intuitively plausible results even in cases where we neutralize other factors.)

Things would have been different if my reason for the relevant action (for instance, for cutting the blue wire) was *that I believe that cutting it will neutralize the bomb*. If this was my reason for action, then given that *you* believe that cutting the *red* wire will neutralize the bomb, there may be an IMPARTIALITY-style reason to go for a symmetrical solution. After all, if my reason for action is indexical in this way (that *I* believe ...), then perhaps I should step back, and think of my beliefs as just the beliefs of someone who happens to be me, and so go for a solution that is impartial between your beliefs and mine. But my reason for cutting the blue wire is not the indexical *that I believe that cutting it will neutralize the bomb*; rather, my reason is *that cutting it will neutralize the bomb* (as I believe)¹². It is this feature of the situation that I take to be normatively significant¹³. If I imagine a case in which cutting the blue wire will neutralize the bomb but I don't (in that hypothetical situation) believe it will, I still (actually) think I should (in that hypothetical situation) cut the blue wire; If I imagine a case in which I (in that hypothetical situation) believe the cutting the blue wire will neutralize the bomb, but this belief is false, I no longer (actually) think that I should (in that hypothetical case) cut the blue wire. So while there may be a normative symmetry between the fact that I have a certain belief and the fact that you have a certain other belief, there is no normative symmetry between the true proposition (that

¹²Dancy (2000) emphasizes something like this insight, but proceeds to develop it in (internalist) directions to which I do not want to commit myself. For this point in the political context, see Raz (1998, 27; 1990, 37). For a discussion of some of its broader epistemological significance, see Schroeder (forthcoming). And for its significance in the context of peer disagreement, see my "Not Just a Truthometer".

¹³So the sense of "reason" I am working with here is neither that of a normative reason nor that of a motivating reasons. Rather, it's *the agent's* reason, that is, the feature of the situation the agent takes (rightly or wrongly) to be normatively significant. For more details here, again see my "Not Just a Truthometer".

cutting the blue wire will neutralize the bomb) and the false one (that cutting the red wire will do so).

Let me not pretend that things are simple or uncontroversial here. Indeed, I think some political philosophers are profoundly mistaken about the significance of disagreement, partly because they fail to appreciate the point from the previous paragraph¹⁴. But I think enough has been said to show that there are important differences between the appropriate way of proceeding in cases of interpersonal conflicts where the conflict is primarily due to mere preferences (or attitudes, or feelings), and cases in which the conflict is primarily due to disagreement about descriptive matters of fact¹⁵.

Now consider cases of *moral* disagreement. Suppose that I believe that there is nothing wrong in causing animals (say, dogs) serious pain. It's not that I hold the factually mistaken belief that dogs are automata that don't have minds and don't feel pain. I believe they do feel pain, but I also believe that morally their pain doesn't count. I do, however, believe I should never admit an error of mine. You, on the other hand, believe that there *is* something morally wrong in subjecting dogs to serious pain, and have no problem with admitting an error. And suppose that we need to decide about a joint course of action, with one alternative involving admitting a previous error, and the only other alternative involving causing serious pain to dogs,

¹⁴ Here I side with Raz (1998; 1990) as against Rawls and, well, almost everyone else. See, for instance, Nagel (1987). It is not clear to me whether these claims are ones Nagel includes under the title "the epistemological argument", which he no longer thinks works (1991, 163, footnote 49). Interestingly, the political philosophers writing in the tradition that takes some kind of agreement to be necessary for political legitimacy typically think only of agreement about normative or related matters. They usually do not discuss disagreement about purely factual matters, seemingly assuming that no problem of legitimacy arises there. It is hard to see what – within the constraints of such theories – can justify this discrimination. For a related point, see Raz (1998, 42, footnote 24). For a welcome exception within the Rawlsian tradition that acknowledges the need to apply the same standards to purely factual disagreement, see Estlund (2008, 44).

¹⁵ Some conflicts may be due both to mere preferences and to other factors (like perhaps factual beliefs). In such cases, IMPARTIALITY entails that we should step back from the preferences, but not necessarily from the other factors.

(these are the only normatively relevant differences between the two cases; all other things are held equal). Suppose further that your relevant moral belief (dog-pain counts; nothing wrong in admitting errors) are true, and that you are epistemically justified in holding them¹⁶, even after taking into account the epistemic significance of this peer disagreement. Further assume that no seriously problematic consequences will follow if you stand your ground. With all these assumptions in place, then, should you stand your ground, as in the case of purely factual disagreement? Or should you opt for an impartial solution, say flipping a coin, or letting me decide this time and you decide next time? It seems intuitively clear that you are justified in standing your ground, making sure that we don't proceed in the way that will subject the dog to serious pain. Similarly, it seems (to me) intuitively clear that in some cases of inter-social or inter-cultural conflicts that are due to moral disagreement (say, about the status of women) we are required – at least if we are right about the substantive issues in dispute – to stand our moral ground¹⁷. Going for an impartial solution will be – unless it can be justified by other factors – morally wrong. And so it seems to me that (when other things are equal) the right way to proceed in cases of interpersonal conflicts due to moral disagreement is analogous to the right way to proceed in cases

¹⁶ What if some kind of skepticism is the right view to hold regarding the possibility of epistemic justification for moral beliefs? In such a scenario, no one's moral beliefs are justified. How would it then be morally justified to proceed? This is an interesting question, and one the answer to which I am not sure I know. But note that if no moral belief can be epistemically justified, then neither can the belief that in such a case we ought to proceed impartially, or indeed the belief that in such a case we ought not to proceed impartially. And this, I take it, makes the skeptical scenario at least somewhat less interesting in our context.

¹⁷ I have focused on cases where the disagreeing parties then have to perform a joint action. Some real-life cases that involve inter-social or inter-cultural conflicts involve not so much joint action, but rather a possible intervention of one party in the actions of the other. Now, when the disagreeing parties are cultures or societies or even states, I am no longer sure there is a normatively significant distinction between a joint action of two parties, and an intervention of one party in the actions of the other. But I am not sure about this, and anyway I don't have to decide this issue here: For if anything, cases of intervention are even clearer than cases of joint action in emphasizing the distinction I want between preference-based and moral disagreements and conflicts: It seems even more clearly wrong to intervene in the actions of another based on mere preferences than it is to give one's own preferences extra weight when it comes to joint action. See also note 20, below.

of interpersonal conflicts due to factual disagreement, and not to the right way to proceed in cases of interpersonal conflicts due to mere preferences (and the like)¹⁸.

Now, the truth in the vicinity of IMPARTIALITY is, I am sure, messier than the discussion here seems to imply¹⁹. Perhaps – though I doubt it – there are cases in which something like IMPARTIALITY holds even in cases of factual or moral disagreement. And as already stated, some partiality may be morally permissible even in some mere-preference cases. But what will be needed for the argument below is just that the two "messes" do not overlap, so that there are many sets of circumstances in which IMPARTIALITY would hold for a mere-preference conflict, but no analogous principle would hold for one that is grounded in a factual or moral disagreement. And this much does seem rather safe.

This discussion of IMPARTIALITY leaves much for further discussion (in what relevant ways can other things fail to be equal, for instance, for IMPARTIALITY not to have its usual implications, even in the case of mere preferences?), and there will be some of this further discussion in what follows. But the general idea IMPARTIALITY is meant to capture is, I hope, at least reasonably clear. And for now, what has been said will have to suffice.

¹⁸ Related points are sometimes made in the political context, for instance in the context of a discussion of conscientious objection and civil disobedience. Those objecting to such measures sometimes seem to argue that in a democratic state, even in cases of moral disagreement people should support an impartial procedure (namely, presumably, the democratic decision-making mechanisms), and not stand their ground. Civil disobedience (and perhaps also conscientious objection) is then criticized for failing to do just that – we are invited to view the disobedient as unreasonable in precisely the same way that I would be had I refused an impartial solution in the movie-versus-tennis example. But this claim is rather obviously false, and accepting it entails the highly implausible result that civil disobedience (and perhaps also conscientious objection) is *never* justified (in a democratic state). Not many will endorse this result. For some relevant discussion – mostly, but not only, in the Israeli context – see Gans (2002, 25 and on).

¹⁹ Here is another kind of mess I won't be discussing (I thank Julie Tannenbaum and Mark van Roojen for drawing my attention to this point): In the tennis-or-a-movie example, it seems that it is permissible – perhaps even virtuous – to let your friend have it their way. And in order to do that, of course, you have to know which preference is yours and which is your friend's, so it can't be morally required that you step back and consider your (and your friend's) preference as just someone's preference. All of this seems right, but I think I can bypass this complication for my purposes. All I need from IMPARTIALITY is that it is not permissible for you to just stand your ground in such cases. For what follows it is not necessary that letting the other party have it their way be impermissible.

2. A Normative Argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM

In this section I describe a certain (caricatured) metaethical view – the one I call CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM – then proceeding to argue that this metaethical view – conjoined with IMPARTIALITY – entails false moral conclusions. If the details of this argument work, two interesting results follow. The first, of course, is that CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is false. The second is that metaethics – or at least CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM – is not morally neutral in one important sense of this problematic term. In other words, though I do not show that CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM (or any other metaethical view) *all by itself* entails first-order, moral conclusions, I nevertheless argue that when conjoined with a true moral premise (namely, IMPARTIALITY) it does entail new, and highly non-trivial moral conclusions. This suffices, I think, for a violation of neutrality, but in order to establish this claim I have to present and defend an interpretation of the idea of neutrality. Because doing so would take me too far from the main line of argument in this paper, I do so in an Appendix. Here, I settle for the first result: Refuting CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM. In the following sections I generalize this result to other, less caricatured, metaethical views.

Consider, then, the following metaethical view:

CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM:

Moral judgments report simple preferences, ones that are exactly on a par with a preference for playing tennis or for catching a movie.

An example of a specific caricatured subjectivist view would be the theory according to which an utterance of "Abortion is wrong" just means "I prefer that

people not have abortions.", with the "prefer" here understood as picking out a simple, non-special straightforward preference.

I don't know of any contemporary philosopher who accepts CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM, perhaps mostly because of the requirement that the preferences reported by moral judgments be non-special (a point to which I return). But for now this doesn't matter. CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is, after all, explicitly here introduced as a caricature of a metaethical view rather than a serious metaethical contender. For now, it will be helpful to focus on this caricature. Less caricatured metaethical views will be discussed in following sections.

Consider, then, the following *REDUCTIO ARGUMENT*:

- (1) CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM.
- (2) If CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is true, then interpersonal conflicts due to moral disagreements are really just interpersonal conflicts due to differences in mere preferences. (from the content of CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM).
- (3) Therefore, interpersonal conflicts due to moral disagreements are just interpersonal conflicts due to differences in mere preferences. (from 2 and 3).
- (4) IMPARTIALITY, that is, roughly: when an interpersonal conflict is a matter merely of preferences, then an impartial, egalitarian solution is called for, and it is wrong to just stand one's ground.²⁰

²⁰ Similar arguments can be constructed with several more specific moral premises. Fantl (2006), for instance, repeatedly talks of violent intervention and it being justified in order to prevent some serious moral wrongs, but not because of reasons merely of moral disapproval. I think that IMPARTIALITY is the general principle underlying more specific examples, Fantl's included. Also, putting things in terms of IMPARTIALITY is more transparent, placing the underlying moral concern in full light. (For the most part Fantl does not even attempt to argue for the specific moral judgment he's assuming. But see Fantl (2006, 39)).

- (5) Therefore, in cases of interpersonal conflict due to moral disagreement, an impartial, egalitarian solution is called for, and it is wrong to just stand one's ground. (from 3 and 4)²¹
- (6) However, in cases of interpersonal conflict due to moral disagreement often an impartial solution is *not* called for, and it is permissible, and even required, to stand one's ground. (from previous section).
- (7) Therefore, CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is false (from 1, 5, and 6, by *reductio*).²²

I think that the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT is a sound argument. It shows that – given some plausible background moral assumption (IMPARTIALITY) – CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM has unacceptable moral implications. We should thus reject CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM on (partly) first-order, normative grounds²³.

At this stage, three objections come to mind.

First, (6) may be rejected on normative grounds. Someone may argue, that is, that something like IMPARTIALITY does hold for conflicts grounded in moral disagreement, that it after all *is* morally wrong to stand one's moral ground in all these cases. I have done what I can to argue against this claim – at least in its general form –

²¹ There may be complications here due to the possible ignorance on the part of the relevant agent, both of the metaethical truth, and of her mental states: For instance, if she falsely (but perhaps justifiably) believes that CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is false, then even if it is true, she may blamelessly stand her moral ground in the face of disagreement. But I think we can safely ignore such complications here and in what follows, for the result that all and only those who appreciate the (supposed) truth of CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM are unjustified in holding their moral ground in the face of disagreement is just as problematic as the result in the argument in the text.

²² It is sometimes suggested – though more often in the classroom than in philosophical texts – that realist metaethical views will lead to intolerance, and that this gives reason to reject them. I believe this line of thought is confused in several ways (so there's good reason why it is not common in serious philosophical texts). But I also believe that there is something right about it, something captured by the argument in the text: On non-objectivist views of morality, it is harder to justify standing one's moral ground in the face of both disagreement and conflict. But, of course, I think of this as an *advantage* of objectivist views. For a somewhat similar point, see Sturgeon (1986, 127).

²³ There are well-known doubts about whether views like CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM can even accommodate interpersonal moral disagreement in a plausible way. In the text I assume they can. If they cannot, they can be rejected for this very reason, of course.

in the previous section (by taking pains to neutralize the influence of other, irrelevant factors, and inviting you to reflect on an example in which this claim is rather implausible). Furthermore, note that for the argument to go through, it is sufficient that there are *some* cases of conflicts due to moral disagreements in which standing one's ground is morally permissible, and in which no exception to IMPARTIALITY would have been justified in mere-preference cases. It is not necessary that this hold of *all* such conflicts. And it is even harder to deny, I think, this existentially quantified reading of (6).

A second objection starts from the (true) observation that (6) itself is a moral statement. So assuming (6) – *read in a way inconsistent with* CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM – amounts to begging the question against the Caricaturized Subjectivist. This is true enough, of course, but the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT only assumes (6) as a premise, it does not assume any specific metaethical understanding of (6). This point can be conveniently put dialectically: The Caricaturized Subjectivist is free to understand (6) in accordance with his Subjectivism. Thus understood, he either accepts or denies (6). If he accepts it, he has yet to find a way of dealing with the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT. If he does not, this second objection collapses into the previous one. Either way, there is no good independent objection here to the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM.

A third objection is more serious. For the argument assumes that all preferences (and the like) are on a par when it comes to IMPARTIALITY. In particular, it assumes that the Caricaturized Subjectivist cannot claim that the preferences to which he reduces morality are special in certain ways, special in ways that make a difference to the appropriate way of proceeding in cases of interpersonal conflict. Why can't the Caricaturized Subjectivist argue that there is no generally appropriate way of

proceeding in cases of interpersonal conflict grounded in preferences? What the appropriate way of proceeding is will depend, he can argue, on the nature of the relevant preferences. Some preferences are such that we are required to step back from them (in the appropriate circumstances), and others aren't; and the ones to which morality is reducible are of the latter kind.

As an objection to the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT above, this objection fails, because CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM was stipulatively defined so as to rule out such a response (because it reduces morality to preferences *that are on a par* with the preferences relevant to the movie-or-tennis case). This objection will not, then, save CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM. But it is still extremely important. For it may be taken to show just how caricatured CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM really is. This objection, in other words, is best seen not as an objection to the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT above, but rather as an objection to any attempt at generalizing the argument to less caricatured, still non-objectivist metaethical positions. Such attempts will be our topic in the rest of this paper.

3. Generalizing: Response-Dependence

No one writing in metaethics today, as far as I know, is a Caricatured Subjectivist. The discussion of CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is not, then, of much interest in itself. It *is* interesting, I hope, for two other reasons. First, it illustrates how a metaethical position can fail to be morally neutral. Second, the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM can serve as a productive start, a step in the right direction for constructing similar arguments against other, not at all caricatured, metaethical positions.

Some ways in which the argument can be generalized are quite straightforward. For instance, if you want a theory that is in certain respects much like CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM, but you hope to avoid the rather obvious counterfactual counterexamples (Had I preferred seasickness, seasickness would have been of value) using the rigidifying trick²⁴ – by introducing an actuality operator that ties the truth of moral judgments even in other possible worlds to the relevant preferences in the actual world – the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM applies pretty much as it stands²⁵. Because I was careful to avoid any counterfactuals in stating the argument and the IMPARTIALITY premise it rests on, rigidifying is just beside the point²⁶.

But I want much, much more. I want to argue that the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM can be generalized to apply to (almost) all response-dependence metaethical views. And to show this, more work needs to be done.

The first thing to note here is that though in the previous section when differentiating the case of disagreement in beliefs from the case of disagreement that is due to preferences I spoke in terms of truth mattering, really it's not *truth* per se that matters. To see what it is that does matter here, think again about IMPARTIALITY, and what seems to have motivated it. So long as it's all about people – their attitudes, preferences, desires, feelings, interests, and even their beliefs²⁷ – then the IMPARTIALITY intuition kicks in, because, well, there's an important sense in which people should count equally. The role the truth of certain factual beliefs played was

²⁴ The seasickness example comes from Lewis, as does the characterization of the rigidifying trick as a trick (1989, 88).

²⁵ For an explicit discussion of rigidification as a way of avoiding neutrality-failure (though not, of course, with the precise understanding of neutrality I defend in the Appendix), see Dreier (2002).

²⁶ If the rigidifying trick is indeed a trick, then that it is beside the point is precisely as it should be.

²⁷ Here, again, it is important to note the difference between the relevant reason for action being the fact that one believes (and then the underlying IMPARTIALITY intuition holds) and the content of the belief (and then it does not).

simply that of *some* standard that is independent of the responses of people, responses which arguably should count equally. But once this is noticed, it becomes clear that truth need not be the only thing that can play this role, and also that not any old truth can play this role.

Start with the latter point. Even CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM, after all, allows for rather straightforward moral truth. According to CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM, the judgment "Abortion is wrong", coming from my mouth, is true if and only if I prefer that people not perform abortions. And so, since there is no problem with truths about which preferences I have, CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM unproblematically allows for moral truth. But this moral truth won't do as a standard neutralizing the IMPARTIALITY intuition, because this truth depends²⁸ on responses to which the IMPARTIALITY intuition applies, and so so does the relevant disagreement or conflict. Another way of making the same point is by returning to the stepping-back metaphor: I suggested that the sometimes-required stepping back involves an abstraction from indexical knowledge, knowledge of who (among those in conflict) is me, or of which responses (among those of the people engaged in the conflict) are mine, and so on. If so, it is not just action on the personal preferences that is ruled out when we are required to step back, but also action on the belief that *my* preference is so-and-so (rather than the belief that *someone's* preference is so-and-so). So really, the argument from IMPARTIALITY (or the generalization of the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM) is best seen not as an argument for moral truth, but rather as an argument against response-dependence theories of moral truth.

²⁸ It is not completely clear or uncontroversial how to understand this dependence. In the context of an argument against response-dependence, though, I think I can safely avoid this issue – I am happy to work with whatever understanding of dependence those I argue against work with. In the context of a discussion of expressivism, though, such nonchalance may no longer be affordable. So I return to this point in the next section.

But we have to be careful here, as not all versions of response-dependence theories are even *prima facie* vulnerable to this argument. Think, for instance, about a social relativist position of sorts, according to which moral judgments are reducible to judgments about social approval of some kind²⁹. According to such a metaethical view conjoined with IMPARTIALITY, what is the appropriate way of proceeding in a situation of moral disagreement? In particular, is an impartial solution called for, or is it morally permissible for the disputing parties (or for some of them) to stand their moral ground? The answer, it seems to me, is "it depends". If the disputing parties are members of the same society, then according to this relativist theory the same moral standards apply to both, and so the disagreement between them is presumably an instance of purely descriptive, factual disagreement. If, however, the disagreement and conflict are *inter*-social, then it seems to me IMPARTIALITY applies. And so, if we think (as I think we should) that sometimes it is morally permissible to stand one's (or one society's) ground in the face of such inter-social disagreement and not go for an impartial solution, then a version of the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM works against this relativism as well. But – returning now to the discussion of response-dependence theories which are not vulnerable to my argument – if there are some responses that are necessarily shared by *all*, then a response-dependence view of morality that only referred to those necessarily-shared responses would treat all moral disagreements in the same way the sketched relativist position treats *intra*-social disagreements and conflicts. So my argument does not apply to constitutivist theories, response-dependence theories that only refer to responses that

²⁹ For my purposes here it does not matter whether the relevant social approval is determined by the social context of the agent or of the speaker (or in some other way). In the text that follows I focus on agent-relativism.

are necessarily shared by all agents (although, of course, those may be subject to other criticisms³⁰).

This, then, is one kind of a response-dependence view to which my argument does not apply. There may be others. Some response-dependence theorists, for instance, include a *normative* element in their analyses, reducing, say, moral judgments not to people's actual responses (of a relevant kind), but to people's *rational* responses. What implications, if any, do such views have with regard to the practical significance of moral disagreement in a case of conflict? The answer depends, I think, on whether – according to the relevant theory – rational responses may differ. If the answer is yes, then in cases of a conflict due to rational-responses differing, the IMPARTIALITY intuition seems to apply (why, in other words, should *my* ideal advisor have privileged normative status over yours?). Such normative response-dependence theories are thus not off the hook. But if rational responses cannot (on the relevant theory) differ, then when it comes to the moral significance of moral disagreement this picture is not different from that of the response-*in*dependence, objectivist, platonist³¹. Such objectivist response-dependence theories are not vulnerable to the generalized version of the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM³².

Another version of a response-dependence view that may – I am genuinely not sure about this – be immune to my argument is a no-priority view. On such views, though there is a sense in which the relevant moral truth depends on the relevant

³⁰ For my own criticism of constitutivist views, see "Agency, Shmagency" (2006). For constitutivist responses, see Velleman (2009, 135-146) and Ferrero (2009). I reply in "Shmagency Revisited" (forthcoming).

³¹ I take it Michael Smith's version of a dispositional theory is one that aspires to this status – for it clearly incorporates a normative condition in the dispositional analysis, and Smith at least conjectures that the relevant rational responses (the desires of ideally rational advisors) will not differ. For references, and a criticism of this point (and others from Smith), see my (2007). For Smith's response, see Smith (2007).

³² Certainly, response-dependence theories that include a "whatever-it-takes" clause (see, for instance, Johnston (1989, 145)) are not vulnerable to my argument. But they have their own problems.

responses, the dependence is not asymmetrical in any interesting way. Depending on how such interdependence is supposed to work, perhaps it can rule out the IMPARTIALITY intuitions that feed the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM and its generalization.

Where does the discussion leave us at this stage, then? What directly mattered for the underlying IMPARTIALITY intuitions, I've argued, was not truth (or the absence thereof) but response-dependence. And so the argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM rather straightforwardly generalizes to many other response-dependence theories, though not to all of them (constitutivist response-dependence theories, some normative ones, and perhaps some no-priority ones are off the hook). But the implications of the point about truth (or its absence) not being what the underlying IMPARTIALITY intuitions are directly motivated by are not restricted to just this generalization. The generalization relied on truth not being sufficient to defeat the IMPARTIALITY intuitions (if the relevant truth is response-dependent). But we should still address the possibility that truth is not *necessary* for defeating IMPARTIALITY and its underlying intuitions. This thought – that perhaps response-independent truth is not necessary for defeating IMPARTIALITY – brings us back to the objection that concluded the previous section – namely, the claim that the subjectivist need not, and should not, treat all preferences alike.

Here is one way of making this point. The feature of CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM that made it especially susceptible to the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT was not the reduction of morality to preferences, but rather the decision to treat the preferences to which morality is reducible as exactly on a par with a preference for playing tennis or for catching a movie. But why accept this further condition? Furthermore, how is this "on a par" to be understood? I used it as a part of my

characterization of a metaethical view (CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM), but isn't this cheating? Isn't this "on a par" a paradigmatically first-order, normative judgment, something to the effect that some preferences are not *more important* than others? If so, what prevents the (non-caricaturized) subjectivist from rejecting the on-a-par clause on first-order, normative grounds? The subjectivist, after all, is not an eliminativist – she is perfectly happy to enter first-order normative discussion, it's just that she has a subjectivist view of what it is that is going on in such a discussion. So in saddling my subjectivist with this problematic normative commitment haven't I just set her up for the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT? There is nothing surprising or informative, of course, about a metaethical theory (or indeed, any other theory) entailing problematic normative conclusions, if the metaethical theory is first itself saddled with some objectionable normative baggage.

The point can also be put thus. For it seems that the subjectivist can rely on *normative* propositions to do the job the objectivist wants response-independence truth to do. What the subjectivist needs in order to escape the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT is a way of distinguishing in a normatively relevant way between the (preference-reducible) moral views of two disagreeing parties. Perhaps she cannot do so by relying on a response-independent truth. But she can certainly say that some moral views (or, for that matter, some preferences) are *better* than others, or more important than them, thereby (purportedly) reporting yet more preferences, and rejecting the supposed parity between the preferences to which morality is reducible and preferences for playing tennis or for catching a movie (where presumably she does not think that some preferences are better than others). And if some preferences are better than others, then why be impartial among them?

Once we leave CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM behind, then, a line of reply opens up for the response-dependence theorist. She can treat the responses to which she reduces morality as – normatively, though perhaps not metaphysically – special, not on a par with (some) other more mundane responses³³. And she can then distinguish between the (morally relevant) responses of disagreeing parties not by tying them to some response-independent truth, but rather by insisting that some of these responses are normatively better than others. And this allows her, the objection concludes, to escape the generalization of the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT unharmed: True, in the movie-or-tennis example, IMPARTIALITY holds, and it's wrong to stand one's ground. But in the moral case, it is sometimes permissible to stand one's ground, and so the analogue of IMPARTIALITY fails. But this doesn't show that morality is not reducible to responses (like preferences). It just shows that the responses to which morality is reducible are normatively special (compared to those relevant to the tennis-or-a-movie case).

I want to emphasize that there is nothing mistaken about this line of thought. Indeed, I think that this is precisely what the response-dependence theorist who feels the force of IMPARTIALITY, but who nevertheless wants to avoid moral spinelessness, should say. But I now want to show that relying on this line of thought is not without cost.

The realist, or objectivist, or anyway response-independence theorist, also – like the non-caricaturized subjectivist – wants to distinguish normatively between, say, the movie-or-tennis case (we should step back, standing one's ground is unreasonable) and the causing-pain-to-a-dog example (we should not step too far

³³ Similarly, the response-dependence theorist may insist that some preferences are simply bad and some good, and that for this reason there is no symmetry between them. But then if this goodness or badness of preferences is itself understood in response-dependence terms, then my main argument seems to apply at that step: For why should the goodness or badness of preferences – itself subjectively understood – escape the force of IMPARTIALITY?

back, standing one's ground is morally permissible, and even required). Suppose we ask this theorist why it is that the analogue of IMPARTIALITY doesn't hold for the latter, or why it is that she distinguishes between these cases. She has a rather obvious answer – the causing-pain-to-a-dog example is, on her theory, more like that of the purely factual disagreement, where truth matters. IMPARTIALITY rests on normative intuitions about the equal moral significance of people and so of their responses. But the symmetry-breaker relevant in the causing-pain-to-a-dog example is a standard that is completely independent of persons and their responses. So the underlying motivations for IMPARTIALITY simply don't apply.

Getting back to the response-dependence theorist: He too, we now say, will want to distinguish normatively between the movie-or-tennis case and the causing-pain-to-a-dog case. So far so good. But when we ask him what his rationale for this distinction is, what can he say? Clearly, he cannot give anything like the reply available to the objectivist. It seems like the best he can do is insist on the normative intuitions themselves, or on some intra-normative support for them: We do, after all, think it's morally wrong for one to stand one's ground in the movie-or-cinema case. And we do, after all, think it is not morally wrong for one to stand one's ground in the causing-pain-to-a-dog case. What further motivation can one ask for distinguishing between the responses relevant in both cases?

But at least in our context, such a move would be objectionably ad hoc. Remember the dialectical situation: We are asking for an explanation of a normative difference (between movie-or-tennis preferences and the responses morality is arguably reducible to). The realist (or objectivist, or Platonist, or whatever) seems to have something to say. The response-dependence theorist, however, simply has no further explanation. In order to avoid normatively problematic consequences, he

explicitly introduces the normative input needed to get the right normative output. But he has nothing to give by way of rationale for this normative input. We knew all along, after all, that *there was* this normative difference. The question was *why* it is that there is such a difference. And here the response-dependence theorist just has no answer.

Perhaps an example will help to make this point more clearly. Suppose, then, that two theorists want to defend the distinction between eating shrimp (morally permissible) and eating beef (morally wrong). Now suppose that one of them does so by directly relying on intuitions with regard to which animals count, or the interests of which animals count, or some such. The other theorist, though, tells another kind of story, about the nature of the relevant creatures and the differences between them. Perhaps, for instance, she says that cows have a central nervous system, and so are rather clearly capable of feeling pain, whereas shrimp do not have a central nervous system, and so are highly unlikely to be able to feel pain. This theorist then proceeds to put forward a general moral principle, according to which it is morally wrong to kill and eat creatures that can feel pain. She offers the conjunction of her biological claims (about central nervous systems), her folk-philosophy-of-mind (about the relation between having a central nervous system and feeling pain), and her cited moral principle (about it being wrong to kill and eat pain-feeling creatures) as an explanation of the moral distinction between eating shrimp and eating beef. In this example, both theorists agree on the moral distinction between eating shrimp and eating beef. And it's not as if the first theorist has nothing to say in defense of this distinction. But it can hardly be denied that the second theorist has *much more* to say. She offers an explanatory layer the first theorist does not offer, and so her theory is (other things being equal) better. Analogously, then: The response-dependence

theorist can happily participate in the normative discussion, defending (to an extent) the moral distinction between mere-preference disagreements and conflicts (IMPARTIALITY applies) and conflicts based on moral disagreements (IMPARTIALITY does not apply). But she can offer very little by way of rationale for this distinction, and anyway much less than can be offered by the response-independence theorist, who can cite the metaphysical difference between the two as further explanation. And just like the more general commitment of the second vegetarian theorist renders the biological and philosophy-of-mind facts morally relevant to her explanation, so too the general moral commitments of the objectivist I am imagining (possibly shared by the response-dependence theorist) make the metaethical facts morally relevant to her explanation. And so, compared to the story offered by the response-dependence theorist, the objectivist has – just like the second vegetarian theorist from this little example – more to offer by way of an explanation of the moral distinction between different kinds of disagreement and conflict. And this difference in explanatory power counts in favor of the objectivist.

Of course, here as anywhere else when an explanatory advantage is claimed by one party to a philosophical debate, the other party may also want to argue that there is really nothing in the vicinity that calls for explanation. This too, then, is an option (of sorts) for the response-dependence theorist. But it is not, I think, an attractive one. It is, after all, also an option for the first vegetarian theorist from the example in the previous paragraph – he can insist that there are these intuitive judgments about the difference in normative status between shrimp and cows, and that that's the end of the matter. But, though moral arguments too come to an end somewhere, in the face of the second theorist's explanation, such insistence sounds highly implausible (and also quite possibly insincere). At the very least, if the first

vegetarian theorist is committed to such insistence, his theory thereby loses plausibility points. Similarly for our response-dependence theorist: He too can insist that there are these intuitive judgments about the difference in normative status between conflicts due to the preferences in the tennis-or-a-movie case and those due to moral disagreement, and that that's the end of the matter. But here too such insistence seems highly implausible. At the very least, if this is the best the response-dependence theorist can say, his theory thereby loses plausibility points.

Perhaps this is too quick, though, because I haven't shown that the response-dependence theorist has no further explanatory story to tell. I've only shown that he can't help himself to the kind of story the response-*in*dependence theorist can help herself to. Can the response-dependence theorist come up with some other explanation of this normative difference? I cannot rule out this possibility. But nor can I think of such an explanation. And let me remind you that the mere strength of the relevant preferences or other responses will clearly not do as a way of distinguishing between the responses to which IMPARTIALITY applies and those to which it does not: This much we've already seen from the example of the two grieving physicians who are the only two physicians in town (in section 2), where the relevant responses can be presumed to be maximally strong, but still IMPARTIALITY applies³⁴.

So my argument from the normative significance of moral disagreement does not amount to a knock-down argument against response-dependence theories

³⁴ In correspondence, Steve Finlay insisted that everything can after all be done here in terms of strength of preferences. On his suggestion, IMPARTIALITY itself gains its significance from the preferences that back it up (say, preferences for the good will of others, and for others believing that we are good-willed). And what explains the difference between the movie-or-tennis example and the causing-pain-to-a-dog example is just that our preferences for IMPARTIALITY are stronger than the preferences relevant for the movie-or-tennis, but weaker than those relevant for the causing-pain-to-a-dog case. But this won't do, for a number of reasons, the clearest of which being that on this suggestion, there is even in the causing-pain-to-a-dog case a reason (perhaps even a moral reason) to go for an impartial solution, except it is outweighed by other reasons. As I have argued, though, IMPARTIALITY simply does not apply in the causing-pain-to-a-dog case at all, so there is not even an outweighed reason to go for an impartial solution.

(honestly, though – did you expect one?). But it is not without force. For it highlights an explanatory challenge response-dependence theorists face. And if they cannot cope with it successfully – if, in other words, they cannot come up with a rationale for treating differently conflicts that are due to moral disagreements and those that are due merely to preferences – then at the very least they are at an explanatory disadvantage compared to response-independence theorists³⁵. Response-dependence theories, then, are not *refuted* by my argument. But they do lose plausibility points.³⁶

4. Generalizing Even Further: Expressivism

If expressivist theories are response-dependence theories, then they are already covered by the discussion of the previous section. However, contemporary expressivists (most clearly, perhaps, Simon Blackburn, whom I'll use as my main interlocutor in this section) like to deny that their view is a response-dependence view in any interesting sense of this theoretical term. So we need to dedicate a separate section to expressivism.

If Blackburn's quasi-realism is right, then he can – on expressivist, or Humean projectivist grounds – give the realist all she could reasonably want, including things like moral beliefs, moral truths, and indeed *objective* moral truths. So it seems like the

³⁵ Response-dependence theorists are, that is, at a *local* explanatory disadvantage compared to response-independent ones. But the explanatory game is a holistic one, and the winner is the ones with the most *overall* explanatory success. So one can consistently acknowledge the explanatory disadvantage of response-dependence highlighted in the text and still claim that *overall* response-independence loses the explanatory game, because of its (purported) many other explanatory disadvantages (I thank an anonymous reader for emphasizing this point). This is indeed so, though personally I am not that impressed by the purported explanatory advantages of less than fully realist metaethical views – and in other work I try to show that neither should you be (the large picture here will be clearest in my *Taking Morality Seriously*, forthcoming). But even if you are impressed with the explanatory disadvantages of response-independence elsewhere, the point in the text still stands – regardless of the results of the holistic explanatory game, response-dependence theories lose plausibility points because of the argument in the text.

³⁶ This explanatory advantage of response-independence is somewhat reduced by the already-mentioned messiness of the truth in the vicinity of IMPARTIALITY. Because of this messiness, the response-independence theorist also cannot claim that her explanation of the relevant normative distinction is completely clean. But still she has an explanatory advantage over the response-dependence theorist.

argument in this paper just doesn't threaten quasi-realist expressivism: Either it can be shown – independently of the argument in this paper – that quasi-realism cannot after all deliver the promised goods, or it cannot so be shown; if this can be shown, then presumably quasi-realism is refuted independently of the argument in this paper. If this cannot be shown, then presumably Blackburn can reject the analogue of IMPARTIALITY for moral beliefs, and can justify (in the relevant circumstances) standing one's moral ground, in a way exactly similar to that of the Platonist. Either way, then, the argument in this paper does not make a serious dialectical difference.

But this, I now want to argue, is too quick. I do not want to quarrel with Blackburn about his success in delivering such things as moral belief and moral truth (I suspect he does not succeed in doing so, but I am willing to assume for the sake of argument that he does). I am even willing to grant that there is *a sense* of objectivity in which he succeeds in giving a quasi-realist understanding of objectivity. Granting all that, I want to now argue that expressivism – quasi-realist or otherwise – is still vulnerable to the argument from IMPARTIALITY.

The crucial point to notice is that the expressivist – even at the end of a hypothetical perfectly successful carrying out of the quasi-realist project – still has to believe that morality somehow depends on us, that the ultimate explanation of why it is that certain moral claims are true has something to do with us and our feelings and attitudes. One way of insisting on this point is by insisting that expressivists are committed to problematic counterfactuals like "Had I approved of bullfighting, bullfighting would have been morally permissible", or the more general and abstract "Had our relevant conative attitudes been different, different moral claims would have been true." But it is important in our context to see that we do not even need to enter

the wars over the readings of such counterfactuals³⁷. The important thing is that – if the expressivist is going to have a distinctive metaethical position at all – she must continue to affirm the metaphysical story of projection, or some such analogous story, even while also engaging in first-order discourse with the realist. After all, Blackburn cannot let his quasi-realist project be *too* successful, for if it is – if there really is *nothing* the realist wants to say that the quasi-realist cannot say – then rather than arguing against realism Blackburn will have argued against the distinction between realism and antirealism³⁸. But Blackburn repeatedly emphasizes³⁹ that his quasi-realism is *based on* his antirealism. So we have to see what difference remains, according to Blackburn, between the realist and his quasi-realist. Here is Blackburn:

But sure we do have a serviceable way of describing the [realist-antirealist] debate, at least as far as it concerns evaluation and morals. It is about explanation. The projectivist holds that our nature as moralists is well explained by regarding us as reacting to a reality which contains nothing in the way of values, duties, rights, and so forth; a realist thinks it is well explained only by seeing us as able to perceive, cognize, intuit, an independent moral reality. He holds that the moral features of things are the parents of our

³⁷ For Blackburn's view, see, for instance, Blackburn (1988, 173). For criticism, see Cassam (1986) and Ramussen (1995).

³⁸ For an especially clear presentation of this worry, see Rosen (1998, e.g. at 395). Johnston (1989, 141) seems to express a similar suspicion when he characterizes those who hold a view of colors analogous to Blackburn's metaethical Quasi-Realism as "delayed-reaction colour realists".

³⁹ As when he characterizes his view as "expressivism with quasi-realist trimmings" (1999, 213). Nevertheless, at times he is not as clear about this, apparently willing to accept realism as commonly characterized – see Blackburn (1991, 42).

sentiments, whereas the Humean holds that they are their children.” (1981, 164-5; see also 185-6)⁴⁰.

So the difference seems to come to a difference in explanatory priority⁴¹. One may, of course, question whether the explanatory claim Blackburn saddles the realist with is really essential to realism⁴². But let me grant Blackburn for the sake of argument this characterization of what is at issue.

Arguably, this explanatory priority of our normative emotions and reactions over the normative truths or facts – a priority the quasi-realist has to insist on if she is to have an independent metaethical position at all – suffices to show that Blackburn's quasi-realism is committed to a contingency (of moral truths) of the kind Blackburn is eager to avoid⁴³. But again, I don't even need *this* much. For my purposes, it is sufficient that this priority suffices for IMPARTIALITY to have its force. If what explains certain moral truths is something about my normative emotions or reactions, and if my normative and emotions are prima facie just as important as those of others, then it *must* be wrong to just stand one's ground in cases of conflict due to moral disagreement. To use Blackburn's metaphor: If the moral features of things are our sentiments' children, then it is very hard to justify – in certain cases of conflict – giving priority to the children of my sentiments over the children of yours.

⁴⁰ For a more recent statement of this kind, see Blackburn (1998, 310): "Remember that for quasi-realism, an ethic is the propositional reflection of the dispositions and attitudes, policies and stances, of people."

⁴¹ See also Blackburn (1999, 216). For a similar point made by Gibbard, in the context of replying to the worry that his view is a mere terminological variant of some cognitivist view, see Gibbard (1992, 971).

⁴² Rosen (1998, 396) does, and to an extent so do I (2003, Chapter 1). And so, if the expressivist claim only comes down to – as one anonymous reader suggested – the denial of the explanatory claim Blackburn saddles the realist with, expressivism is a very weak commitment indeed, one that is consistent, for instance, with some versions of even Platonism. It is hard to accept this as a plausible understanding of expressivism, or, for that matter, of Blackburn.

⁴³ For related points, see McDowell (1985, 124, footnote 4) and Sturgeon (1992, 114, footnote 2).

Perhaps, though, I am making too much of a few sentences from Blackburn where he is not at his quasi-realist best⁴⁴. Perhaps, in other words, though Blackburn *does* seem to say that the moral features of things are explained by our sentiments, this is not something he *should* say. Rather, he should insist – consistently with the most general expressivist strategy – on not saying anything about what (except for other moral claims) explains the moral truths or properties themselves (he does not, after all, have a truth-conditional theory). Even so, though, the expressivist will not be off the hook. For at the very least the expressivist should insist that at the most fundamental explanatory level, all there is in the vicinity of morality are people and their responses, that there is nothing more (at that fundamental explanatory level). But this much seems enough, it seems to me, in order to trigger the normative motivations underlying IMPARTIALITY.

Indeed, Blackburn seems to agree that on his theory there is a sense in which moral truths and facts are really just a matter of our passions, that it is really *we* whose feelings explain morality. Blackburn denies not these claims, but rather their normative significance. To quote again from the telling paragraph already quoted in section 1:

“Does the lover escape his passion by thinking ‘Oh, it’s only my passion, forget it’? When the world affords occasion for grief, does it brighten when we realize that it is we who grieve?” (1993, 176)

Blackburn seems here to concede that there's a sense in which morality is just a matter of our passions (though he would deny the belittling of these passions presumably pragmatically implicated by this "just"), and to argue (by rhetorical questions,

⁴⁴ I've heard suggestions of this kind (separately) from Michael Ridge and Nadeem Hussain. And I think (but I am not sure) I heard Blackburn himself concede as much in discussion.

presumably coding a *reductio* argument) that morality is none the worse for that. But as already noted, though Blackburn is right to insist that there are some normative consequences that are *not* implied by the characterization of the love as just my passion, or by the characterization of the grief as mine, he is wrong in suggesting that there are no normative implications that *are* sensitive to these characterization. The implications associated with IMPARTIALITY clearly are.

Of course, the main line of reply that was available to the response-dependence theorist is also available to the expressivist – the latter can insist, just like the former, that some of our responses (or passions, or attitudes, or feelings, or whatever) are unique, and that it is *those* that are (to use Blackburn's metaphor) the parents of the moral features of things. And the expressivist can further insist that the classification of responses as special (or as non-special) is itself a normative matter, about which her expressivism implies nothing one way or another, so that she can join this part of the normative discussion with the rest of us⁴⁵. And here too this would show that the argument in this paper does not amount to a refutation of expressivism. But here too expressivism will be losing plausibility points, as it cannot explain this distinction (among our relevant responses), and so stands at an explanatory disadvantage compared to more objectivist views.

5. Generalizing Further Still?

The argument that started as an argument against CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM can be generalized so as to apply to many response-dependence theories and expressivist theories as well (or so, at least, I've argued in the last two sections). How much further – if at all – can it be generalized?

⁴⁵ I take it this is what Blackburn says in related contexts (1993, 156; 1998, 306). See also Horgan and Timmons (2006, 95-6).

The argument in this paper – even if entirely successful – cannot alone support Robust Realism. In section 3 I have already mentioned several response-dependence views to which the argument does not apply – constitutivist ones, some normative ones, and perhaps also some no-priority ones. And if such response-dependence theories have expressivist analogues, then perhaps those too are immune to my argument here.

Another family of metaethical theories that aren't robustly realist but to which the argument doesn't apply are objectivist naturalist reductions. If moral truths or facts just are natural facts that do not depend in any constitutive way on people's responses, then moral disagreements are not significantly and relevantly different from disagreements about matters of natural fact, and we've already seen that IMPARTIALITY does not apply to those.

A more interesting question is whether anything like the argument developed in this paper has any weight at all against error theories. I think the answer may depend on the details of the relevant error theory. Eliminativist error theorists – those who argue not just that our moral discourse is systematically mistaken, but also that it should be discarded – are entitled, it seems, to object to my argument for objectivity because it employs a moral premise (IMPARTIALITY) which they believe is just as problematic as all other parts of moral discourse. Using a moral premise in an argument against this kind of metaethical error theory would be a case of begging the question, tantamount to using a premise committed to the existence of witches in an argument against an error theory about witch-discourse. Now, I think this line of thought raises interesting questions about which question-beggings are and which are not objectionable, questions I cannot address here. But anyway, this line of thought does suffice to show that if we're trying to refute an eliminativist error theory, my

argument from IMPARTIALITY is of no special interest. It is not interestingly different from the following argument against metaethical error theory:

- (1) Murder is wrong.
- (2) It's true that murder is wrong. (From (1), and one direction of the disquotation schema for truth).
- (3) Therefore, it's not the case that no primitive moral judgment is true. (from (2)).

You may think that there is *some* problem with this argument – though again, nothing here seems obvious to me. But anyway, if it is legitimate to use a moral premise in an argument against an eliminativist error-theory, then it seems we can rely on this little argument, and there is no need to think about moral disagreement and conflict.

How about non-eliminativist error theories, error theories that in some sense allow (and perhaps even recommend) that we continue to engage in the systematically erroneous moral discourse? Does the argument from IMPARTIALITY apply to them as well? Again, I think, the answer may differ according to the details of the relevant view. A fictionalist view (of the error-theoretic kind), for instance, with severe restrictions on admissible fictions, may be immune to my argument. If, for instance, you believe that moral discourse is systematically erroneous, but that we can talk about what is and what is not true in the objective-value-story, and furthermore if you think there is some objective sense in which it is *this* story (rather than others) that we must be telling, then you may not be vulnerable to the argument from IMPARTIALITY: After all, according to such a view moral questions have objectively correct (if not true) answers. But if your fictionalism allows for a plurality of fictions that are, in some sense, on a par, then it is hard to see how your view can avoid the argument developed in this paper.

The argument from IMPARTIALITY to objectivity cannot support Robust Realism. As has been seen, quite a few other metaethical views are not vulnerable to it. But the argument does strongly count against a rather wide range of theories. And the theories that are not vulnerable all merit being called objectivist, I believe, in at least one sense of this term. To this I now turn.

6. Objectivity Again

As already mentioned, the term "objectivity" is notoriously ambiguous, even when considered just in the metaethical context. And because of this, I chose to conduct my discussion largely without using this term. But I want to suggest, in conclusion, that the concern expressed by IMPARTIALITY manages to capture at least one good understanding of this problematic concept.

Think again about the (rough) division of metaethical views to those which are and those that are not prima facie vulnerable to my argument. Roughly: Many response-dependence theories, relativist theories, expressivist theories, and at least some error theories on one side; Robust Realism, objectivist naturalist realism, and constitutivism on the other side. This division nicely fits, I take it, our pretheoretic distinction between objectivist and non-objectivist metaethical theories (to the extent that we have pretheoretic beliefs about such things). Indeed, it is an advantage of the understanding of objectivity that seems to underlie my argument that it gives a rather clear sense in which expressivist theories are not objectivist: a suspicion many of us have had for a while, but one it has proved very hard to support⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ Russ Shafer-Landau (2003, 30-33) claims that noncognitivists are closet relativists. I think that his arguments for this claim do not, at the end of the day, withstand criticism as stated. But I think the intuition underlying them is exactly right: It is that noncognitivist views are not objectivist in something like the sense suggested in the text.

Furthermore, objectivity does seem closely related to the availability of standards of correctness that can settle (in some sense) disputes, standards of correctness that do not depend on the relevant persons and their responses. And my argument for objectivity does make use of precisely this feature of certain conflicts and disagreements. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that what I have in effect been arguing for is the objectivity of morality, in at least one legitimate sense of this term.

Now, objectivity is sometimes understood as a metaphysical issue, perhaps one about the existence of objects. At other times, it is understood as primarily an epistemological issue, or as an issue involving both metaphysical and epistemological concerns⁴⁷. And there may be yet other ways of understanding objectivity. But it seems to me that the best way of proceeding in discussing objectivity is to start with a clear understanding of why it is that objectivity matters, of why it is an interesting question to ask about morality whether it is objective, and about a metaethical theory whether it is objectivist. And objectivity is important, I want to suggest, precisely because of its moral significance in cases of interpersonal conflict. So while the discussion above was a discussion of how it is that objectivity (or anyway one thing worth the name) matters, it can contribute in the suggested way to a better understanding of what objectivity is.

Paul Bloomfield (2003) expresses what seem to be similar thoughts. But unlike Shafer-Landau, he cannot (I think) be read as putting forward an underdeveloped version of the argument in this paper, because he is explicitly committed to the normative neutrality of metaethics (see his (2009)). For a noncognitivist defense against accusations such as Shafer-Landau's and Bloomfield's, see Horgan and Timmons (2006) and the references there. Horgan and Timmons understand the issue as one about truth or correctness. But if I am right, the real problem is a first-order, moral one, starting with IMPARTIALITY. There is no reply in Horgan and Timmons's paper to this kind of worry. For Gibbard's list of things that could be meant by objectivity, and for his attempt at supplying them on expressivist grounds, see Gibbard (1990, 155). Of the three issues he mentions, the third one (authority) is closest to the kind of objectivity I think my argument captures. His attempt to accommodate such objectivity is in terms of conversational demands and higher-order norms, an attempt that – if the argument in section 4 works – cannot succeed.

For Blackburn's similar attempts, see his (1998, 307-8).

⁴⁷ This is probably the right characterization of Wright's (1992) tests for objectivity (sometimes put as tests for realism).

Appendix: Neutrality

The suggestion that metaethical theories can be rejected on normative grounds naturally raises worries about the supposed moral neutrality of metaethics. But I don't think that there is in the (limited) literature on metaethical neutrality a good enough understanding of this idea⁴⁸. In this appendix I try to develop an account of neutrality, one that – as I proceed to show – is very relevant to the argument in the main paper. It will not be a part of what I argue for, however, that this is the only possible or productive understanding of neutrality. Indeed, it is limited in ways that I mention below. But still, it nicely captures at least one central family of ideas often associated with talk of metaethical neutrality. And thinking about neutrality in those terms is, I believe, productive, in ways that tie this appendix with the main argument of the paper.

What does it mean for metaethics to be – or to fail to be – morally neutral? Indeed, what does it mean for one discourse, D_1 , to be neutral with regard to another, D_2 ?

One thing that would rather clearly seem to constitute a failure of neutrality is if some D_1 -propositions entailed, all by themselves, some D_2 -propositions. If a valid argument can be constructed with only D_1 -premises and a D_2 -conclusion, then it seems that D_1 is not neutral with regard to D_2 ⁴⁹. And so, if there are valid arguments with purely metaethical premises and a first-order moral conclusion, then metaethics, it seems, is not morally neutral.

⁴⁸ Throughout this appendix, I refer to the recent literature that I found addressing this issue. But this issue was more vividly discussed in the 1950s and 60s. For references, see Sumner (1967, footnotes 1 and 5, on page 106).

⁴⁹ There may be complications here, but not, I think, ones we need to worry about in our context. See Dreier's (2002, 247) distinction between commitment and implication. Fantl (2006, 28) also nicely bypasses these complications in our context.

Before proceeding to show that the criterion for neutrality seemingly implied by such observations is far too weak – even if there are no such implication relations, still metaethics may very well fail to be morally neutral – I want to note that this criterion is also too strong. D_1 may be neutral with regard to D_2 in an important sense even if there *are* valid arguments from only D_1 -premises to a D_2 -conclusion.

To see this, think about an error theory about mathematical objects, of the kind defended by Hartry Field (1980). Is it neutral with regard to number-theory? If we employ the criterion suggested above, the answer is clearly "no". For it follows from the error theory itself that there are no prime numbers between 13 and 16, or indeed between 10 and 20 (because, well, there are no numbers), and these are number-theoretic propositions if anything is. But, I now want to argue, it would be far too quick to conclude that the philosophy-of-mathematics error theory is not in an important sense neutral with regard to basic number-theory. Field's error theory still seems number-theoretically neutral in something like the following intuitive sense: Practicing mathematicians needn't worry about it. While the error theory may have first-order implications, it does not have *discriminating* first-order implications, it cannot, for instance, settle any number-theoretic disputes⁵⁰. Indeed, this is *why* practicing mathematicians need not worry about it, even if it shows that many of their beliefs are false: If a mathematician wonders whether, say, there is a largest prime, or if two mathematicians differ on this question, then despite the fact that Field's error theory entails that there is no largest prime, still it is not relevant to the mathematicians' concerns, and it would be an obvious *faux pas* for a practicing mathematician to rely on Field's error theory (instead of the number-theoretic proof) in defending her claim that there is no largest prime. We can conveniently put the

⁵⁰ This non-discrimination does not mean that the error theory assigns the same truth value to all first-order propositions. It cannot consistently do that, of course.

point in fictionalist terms: if Field's error theory is right, then what practicing mathematicians are interested in is the number-theoretic fiction (which they may think of as non-fictional). And while the relevant error theory does say *that* the number-story is a fiction, it has no implications *within* that fiction. And so those studying what's true *in* that fiction need not worry about Field's error theory. In this sense, then, Field's error theory is (or at least, for anything thus far said may very well be) number-theoretically neutral, even though it entails number-theoretic propositions (and sometimes rather surprising ones). It is, in a perfectly understandable, though not perfectly precise, sense not something the practicing mathematician needs to worry about.⁵¹

The same may be true of some metaethical positions, like some versions of metaethical error theory. Noticing this can help solve a puzzle in reading Mackie (1977). Mackie is commonly taken to have argued for a metaethical error theory (at least about objective values). But he also claimed first-order neutrality for his "second-order skepticism", claiming that first- and second-order claims are "not merely distinct but completely independent" (1977, 16). Given the obvious implication relations between his error theory and numerous first-order claims (it's not the case that love is of value; it's not the case that murder is wrong, etc.), how could Mackie seriously claim neutrality for his metaethical theory? A plausible answer is suggested, I think, by the previous paragraphs: Perhaps Mackie thought that his metaethical error theory is not something people thinking about first-order morality

⁵¹ Not all error theories share this feature. All those engaged in first-order witch-discourse *should* be worried about the possible truth of a second-order error theory about witch-discourse. This is so, presumably, because our now commonsensical error theory about witch-discourse is *eliminativist*, we think that people should just stop engaging in witch-discourse. But Field's error theory about mathematical objects is not eliminativist in this way. And it seems clear that neither is Mackie's error theory about morality, to which I turn in the text. This suggests the following plausible generalization: While eliminativist error theories are not completely neutral with regard to the discourse they are about (even though they are still non-discriminatory), non-eliminativist error theories may very well be.

should worry about, because – though it has first-order implications – it does not have discriminating implications, in the sense outlined above.

So $D_1 \rightarrow D_2$ implication relations do not suffice for neutrality-failure. Perhaps more importantly, nor are such implication relations necessary for neutrality-failure. To see this, think again about the metaethical case. Now suppose that there are no valid arguments with only metaethical premises and a moral conclusion, but that there are valid arguments with one metaethical premise and one factual, descriptive (neither moral nor metaethical) auxiliary premise, and a moral conclusion. And suppose, crucially, that the auxiliary factual premise is true (or at least very plausible), and that it does not entail the moral conclusion all by itself. In such a case, the metaethical premise clearly makes a moral difference – with it, the moral conclusion follows, and without it, it doesn't. In a clear sense, then, in such a case there is a failure of metaethical neutrality, even though there are no valid arguments from purely metaethical premises to a normative conclusion. More generally and abstractly: D_1 can fail to be neutral with regard to D_2 even in the absence of $D_1 \rightarrow D_2$ implication relations, if there are $(D_1 \ \& \ D_3) \rightarrow D_2$ ⁵² implication relations, where the relevant D_1 -premises are not redundant.

But there's more. Suppose there is a valid argument with one metaethical premise and one first-order, *moral* auxiliary premise, and a moral conclusion, and assume that the moral conclusion would not have followed from the moral premise alone. In such a case, though a moral premise is needed for the moral conclusion to follow, still the metaethical premise makes a moral difference: For the moral conclusion would not have followed without it. Here too, then, there is a failure of metaethical neutrality. More generally: D_1 can fail to be neutral with regard to D_2 even

⁵² Throughout I assume that $D_1 \neq D_2 \neq D_3$.

in the absence of $D_1 \rightarrow D_2$ implications relations, and even in the absence of $(D_1 \ \& \ D_3) \rightarrow D_2$ implications relations, if there are valid $(D_1 \ \& \ D_2) \rightarrow D_2$ implication relations where the D_1 -premise is non-redundant, in the way just sketched.

These considerations suggest, I now want to argue, that a productive way of thinking about neutrality will be in terms of one discourse being (or failing to be) a *conservative extension* of another. In the proof-theoretic terms in which the idea of a conservative extension is usually discussed: A theory T_1 conservatively extends a theory T_2 if and only if all the theorems of T_2 are also theorems in the extended theory $(T_2 \ \& \ T_1)$, and all of the theorems of $(T_2 \ \& \ T_1)$ that are stated purely in T_2 -terms are also theorems of T_2 . Intuitively, while a conservative extension allows to prove more theorems in the extended language, it does not allow to prove more theorems *in the original, non-extended language*. An example may make this clearer: Arguably, mathematics conservatively extends physics⁵³. What this means is that there are no *purely physical* results that are provable in the combined language of mathematics and physics that are not already provable in the language of physics alone. If mathematics conservatively extends physics, then while mathematics may make a huge difference to our way of doing physics (perhaps, for instance, some mathematics facilitates much easier or shorter proofs), still there is a clear sense in which mathematics doesn't matter to physics: Any purely physical result that is provable given the extension (that is, including mathematics) is already provable in the non-extended language of physics. In principle, then, mathematics doesn't teach us any new things about physics⁵⁴.

⁵³ Field (1980, Chapter 1)

⁵⁴ Needless to say, I do not want to commit myself one way or another on the question whether mathematics conservatively extends physics. Even if mathematics extends physics non-conservatively, still the example is helpful in getting my point across.

The idea of a conservative extension gives us a way of thinking about neutrality in general, and metaethical neutrality in particular. Perhaps the proof-theoretic talk is not very helpful when it comes to the moral significance of metaethics, but the underlying idea is easily generalizable. For we can replace talk of proofs with talk of good arguments, referring to whatever standards of good arguments are appropriate in the context. We then get that D_1 conservatively extends D_2 if and only if any D_2 -proposition that is supported by a good argument in D_2 is also supported (to the same degree) by a good argument in the extended ($D_2 \& D_1$), and any purely D_2 -proposition that is supported by a good argument in the extended ($D_2 \& D_1$) is already supported (to the same degree) by a good argument in the original D_2 , so that the support it gets in the extended language does not add anything to the support it already has in the non-extended language⁵⁵. Put more intuitively, focusing on the second conjunct, and now applying it to the case that is of interest to us here: Metaethics conservatively extends ethics only if there are no moral propositions that can only be supported (to a certain degree) by a good argument with at least one metaethical premise, only if the degree of support any moral proposition gets in the extended language of ethics and metaethics together is identical to that it gets in the language of normative ethics alone. And the discussion above suggests that if metaethics does *not* conservatively extend ethics, and furthermore if the way in which metaethics non-conservatively extends ethics is discriminating (so that it's not a case where the implications are ones ethicists need not worry about), then in an important sense metaethics is not morally neutral.

⁵⁵ If a purely D_2 -proposition p is supported to degree d in the extended ($D_2 \& D_1$), and if there is also a purely D_2 -argument supporting p to degree d , this does not suffice for the extension to be conservative, because it's possible that the two arguments *together* support p to a degree greater than d . In such a case, the extension still makes a difference to the warranted credence in the purely D_2 -proposition p . The wording in the text is supposed to rule out this possibility.

Notice that it falls out of what has been said that for metaethics to fail to be morally neutral, metaethical premises must play the relevant role in *good* arguments, that is, arguments the moral premises of which are true, or at the very least plausible. Consider the following argument, which I'll call *SIMON SAYS*:

- (1) If Simon's philosophical views are right, then you ought to always do as Simon says.
- (2) Simon's philosophical views are right.
- (3) Therefore, you ought to always do as Simon says.

Here, premise (1) is a paradigmatic moral premise (in the sense in which "moral" is the opposite of "non-moral", not of "immoral"). Premise (2) is a paradigmatic metaethical premise, at least given a suitable specification of Simon's philosophical views, which include his metaethical views. The conclusion follows from (1) and (2), but we may safely assume that it doesn't follow from (1) alone, or indeed from any argument that does not have anything like (2) as a premise. But if merely stating the *SIMON SAYS* argument is enough to show that metaethics is not morally neutral, then the discussion over neutrality has been trivialized, and furthermore then no discourse is neutral with regard to any other one (just replace "Simon's philosophical views" with "Simon's macroeconomic views", or "Simon's views regarding the existence and nature of god", or whatever)⁵⁶. What has to be shown, then, in order to show that metaethics extends ethics non-conservatively is that there is a *good* argument from a metaethical premise – perhaps conjoined with other *true, or at least plausible* moral premises – to a moral conclusion that wouldn't be supportable without the metaethical premise. A cooked-up moral premise (like (1) in *SIMON SAYS*) is just not good enough

⁵⁶ Here's Dreier (2002, 247) making a similar point: "We were hoping for a sense of carrying moral commitment in which metaethical theories do and Newtonian mechanics does not carry any." Fantl (2006) notices that on his understanding of neutrality, no discourse is neutral with regard to any other. He takes this not as a reason to understand neutrality differently, but rather as a reason to think that neutrality is only interesting when the relevant further premise is plausible or true.

for that. And this is in line, of course, with other contexts in which the idea of a conservative extension is productive: When asking whether mathematics conservatively extends physics we do not, I take it, wonder whether any cooked-up proposition that could be classified as a part of physics can render a mathematical premise physics-relevant in a way that violates conservativeness. Rather, we ask whether there is any *true* physics-proposition that does so, or perhaps whether there is any physics-proposition that is in the game for being true – one that seems plausible to us, and about whose truth-value we are not confident, or something like that – that can do so.

Indeed, this understanding of neutrality suggests that we should restrict the relevant arguments not to just those with true (or at least plausible) *moral* premises, but also to just those with true (or at least plausible) *metaethical* premises. But I suggest that at this stage we do not go this way, because I am here ultimately interested in using first-order moral insights in order to help us decide between competing metaethical views. So I suggest that at this point we suspend – for the sake of argument – metaethical judgment, and just proceed to see whether any metaethical theory – true or false – can be shown to have moral implications, in the sense that *if* the metaethical theory is true, it extends first-order ethics in a non-conservative way.

This, then, is how I suggest that we understand the question of metaethical neutrality⁵⁷: The question is whether there are good, discriminating arguments with a moral conclusion, and at least one indispensable metaethical premise, that is, whether there are any moral propositions such that the degree of support they have given the

⁵⁷ I am going to have to make one last revision below. And let me again stress that I am not invested in the claim that this is the *only* way in which it can or should be understood. I am insisting only on this being *one* interesting, theoretically productive way of understanding it.

partly metaethical argument is greater than the degree of support they get from purely first-order arguments.⁵⁸

This way of understanding the question of metaethical neutrality has several notable advantages: First, it is reasonably precise. Second, as has been argued above, it nicely answers to the intuition regarding whether or not metaethics makes a moral difference. Third, it is itself to a large extent neutral as between different ways of delineating the moral and the metaethical. Indeed, it can be easily generalized so as to apply to any two discourses, and seems to me like a promising initial way of thinking about neutrality elsewhere as well: Does the philosophy of mathematics conservatively extend mathematics? Does the philosophy of science conservatively extend science? Does religion conservatively extend political philosophy? Does philosophy conservatively extend, well, everything else?

Notice also that this way of understanding the issue – and this is its fourth advantage – includes other ways as particular instances. After all, perhaps some metaethical theories do imply (in a discriminating way), all by themselves, moral conclusions. Analytic Utilitarianism is an example that comes to mind, though I have doubts about its playing this role⁵⁹. If so, metaethics is – or at least *these* metaethical theories are – certainly not morally neutral. But in these cases it is also true, of course, that metaethics doesn't conservatively extend ethics.

⁵⁸ This way of understanding the neutrality issue draws on Sturgeon's (1986, 125) suggestion that realists and noncognitivists have to differ ethically when they both accept "any ethical principle whose applications *depends* on whether there is moral truth or moral knowledge." Sturgeon then proceeds to mention some ethical principles of this kind, without much argument. I do not find his examples compelling, and I think his discussion is imprecise at points. Nevertheless, I am indebted to his discussion. Indeed, my argument in this paper can be seen as an attempt to carefully fill in the details in the intuition that Sturgeon got right.

For Sturgeon's focus on good – but not necessarily deductively valid – arguments here (on which I also draw), see Sturgeon (1986, 135).

⁵⁹ Analytic Utilitarianism certainly does have moral implications, but I would be reluctant to classifying it as a metaethical position. It has a metaethical element, of course – analytic naturalism. This element is paradigmatically metaethical. But this element alone does not, it seems to me, have moral implications. Be that as it may, I do not need to decide this issue here.

A final advantage I want to mention of this way of understanding the neutrality issue is that if metaethics turns out not to be neutral in this way – if metaethics extends ethics non-conservatively – then this conclusion will constitute a sane middle-ground between neutralists and quietists⁶⁰. Quietists (as I understand this term in this context) argue, roughly⁶¹, that there just is no metaethical discourse that is at all distinct from good-old first-order moral discourse⁶². I cannot here, of course, argue against such quietism⁶³. Let me just note that quietists often spend significant effort in establishing implication relations between supposedly metaethical propositions and paradigmatically moral ones, and then take themselves to have shown that metaethics *just is* ethics⁶⁴. This move cannot, I think, be defended. And the idea of a (non-)conservative extension nicely shows why: If, say, mathematics non-conservatively extends physics, then mathematics is not completely physically-neutral, but on the other hand this clearly does not count in favor of a reduction of mathematics to physics.

Before proceeding to show how the discussion of IMPARTIALITY nicely exemplifies a violation of neutrality thus understood, let me quickly address a worry about my suggested understanding of the neutrality debate⁶⁵. For it may be thought

⁶⁰ See Gewirth (1960, 188) for a related point. I think that Gewirth's rejection of metaethical neutrality is motivated – much like mine – by thoughts about what it would take to take morality seriously (see, for instance, 204), but the details of his discussion are very different from mine.

⁶¹ This "roughly" has a dual role here: The normal role, indicating that this is not a precise statement of quietist claims as I understand them, and a further role, indicating that it is often not at all clear to me what quietists are saying.

⁶² Rather obvious examples here are Dworkin, and also (in some moods, at least) Blackburn, and perhaps also McDowell and Rorty. For discussion and references see Svavarsdóttir (2001, 171-3) and Bloomfield (2009). For a view that is not exactly quietist in this sense, but that shares with quietism an impatience for the more metaphysical parts of metaphysics, see Scanlon (forthcoming).

⁶³ For an initial discussion, see my (2003, 329-340).

⁶⁴ This is perhaps clearest in Dworkin (1996). This is not the only way quietists support their quietism. Sometimes they also claim that supposedly metaethical claims *can only be made sense of* as first-order moral judgments (for instance, Blackburn 1998, 311). It is hard to argue against such (obviously false, I would say) claims, for as Lewis (1986, 203, footnote 5) notes, "any competent philosopher who does not understand something will take care not to understand anything else whereby it might be explained."

⁶⁵ For pressing me on this point, I thank Melis Erdur and Jamie Dreier.

that there is after all a sense in which this understanding of neutrality makes the issue trivial: After all, in the sense in which I understand neutrality, *purely factual* discourse ends up not being morally neutral, for surely facts make a moral difference, and some specific moral judgments can only be supported (to the degree that they can be supported) given some factual premises. Indeed, pretty much anything can be morally relevant, and so pretty much nothing is morally neutral in the sense of neutrality suggested above. And my discussion can be criticized for its attempt to borrow an understanding of neutrality from other discourses precisely because pretty much anything can be morally relevant, but it's not the case that pretty much anything can be mathematically or proof-theoretically relevant.

I agree that pretty much anything can be morally relevant: Consider "Jamie promised to Φ if p ." For just about any p , if Jamie promised to do something if p , then p becomes morally relevant⁶⁶. But this is not the kind of relevance that is needed for neutrality, for this kind of relevance is too contingent (on the content of Jamie's contingent promises). The intuitive idea in dispute between those taking metaethics to be morally neutral and those denying this neutrality is about some *internal* connections, as it were, between metaethics and morality, or some non-contingent, at least morally necessary connections of this sort. In *this* way, of course, it is not the case that pretty much anything is morally relevant. This qualification does not take away anything, I think, from the advantages I detailed above of my understanding of the neutrality issue.

With neutrality thus understood, then, is metaethics morally neutral? The discussion in the main parts of this paper shows that it is not. To see this, return to the

⁶⁶ I thank Jamie Dreier for a version of this example.

REDUCTIO ARGUMENT, but focus now on just its first five stages, which constitute what I will call the SIMPLE ARGUMENT:

- (1) CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM.
- (2) If CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is true, then interpersonal conflicts due to moral disagreements are really just interpersonal conflicts due to differences in mere preferences. (from the content of CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM).
- (3) Therefore, interpersonal conflicts due to moral disagreements are just interpersonal conflicts due to differences in mere preferences. (from 2 and 3).
- (4) IMPARTIALITY, that is, roughly: when an interpersonal conflict is a matter merely of preferences, then an impartial, egalitarian solution is called for, and it is wrong to just stand one's ground.
- (5) Therefore, in cases of interpersonal conflict due to moral disagreement, an impartial, egalitarian solution is called for, and it is wrong to just stand one's ground. (from 3 and 4)

This SIMPLE ARGUMENT has a first-order, moral (that is, not non-moral) conclusion. Of its two interesting premises, one (1) is metaethical, and the other (4) a true, or at least plausible, first-order, moral premise. And it is clear that in this argument, the metaethical premise is indispensable. So if no purely normative argument – argument without any metaethical premises – can support (5) (to the same degree) it is supported (also) given the SIMPLE ARGUMENT, CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM non-conservatively extends first-order morality. And I think it is plausible that no purely normative argument can do that, for the following reasons. First, remember that what would be needed are normative arguments that support (5) *to the same degree*, so that the availability of the SIMPLE ARGUMENT in no way increases the plausibility of (5). So long as the SIMPLE ARGUMENT makes a difference with regard to (5)'s plausibility,

CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM still makes a moral difference. And even if you can think of some purely normative argument that supports (5), it is hard to believe it would render the SIMPLE ARGUMENT entirely irrelevant. Second, let me remind you that with regard to purely factual beliefs, we've seen that (5)'s analogue fails. So in order to argue for (5) in the moral case, it seems that a metaethical disanalogy between moral and non-moral, factual disagreement has to be relied on. Third, and relatedly, on more realist views, (5) is deeply mysterious. If moral judgments are representations of Plato's Forms, say, then why on earth think that there's even a prima facie symmetry between accurate and inaccurate representations thereof? But if on such a metaethical view (5) is highly surprising, then it seems highly unlikely that a convincing argument for (5) can be constructed that does not include something like a denial of such a metaethical view as a premise.⁶⁷ For these reasons, then, I believe that we can safely conclude that CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM extends morality non-conservatively.

Note also that (5) is a highly interesting moral conclusion, one that may very well be in dispute among people only interested in normative ethics. So it cannot be said that the normative implications of CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM are ones that those engaging in normative ethics need not worry about. And so – given the discussion earlier in this appendix – CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM is not morally neutral. (Let me further note here just that even if the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT fails (because its premise (6) is false), the SIMPLE ARGUMENT still stands, and that is enough to show that some metaethical positions violate moral neutrality (in the sense developed above).)

⁶⁷ You may recall that when presenting the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT I argued on first-order, normative grounds directly that (5) is false. If so, and assuming the consistency of first-order morality, it follows that there cannot be a good moral argument for (5). But I do not want to deny the dialectical awkwardness of relying on the denial of (5) in arguing that the SIMPLE ARGUMENT shows that CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM extends morality non-conservatively.

In sections 3 and 4 above I generalized the REDUCTIO ARGUMENT (of which the SIMPLE ARGUMENT is a part) to many other metaethical views. If the argumentation works, we can apply it here to conclude that not just CARICATURIZED SUBJECTIVISM but in fact many other metaethical theories are not morally neutral⁶⁸. And this suffices, I believe, to render the following conclusion not too premature: In at least one important sense of "neutrality", metaethics is not morally neutral.

Recall the brief discussion above of the sense in which Field's error theory about numbers can be number-theoretically neutral. As I put it there: While Field's theory clearly implies that number theory is fictional, it arguably has no implications *within* the fiction. The nice thing about the argument from IMPARTIALITY is that if it works it shows that morality is in this regard unlike mathematics. For while there presumably are no mathematical theorems that render Field's error theory relevant within the mathematical story (or fiction) itself, there *is* a moral "theorem" that could – within certain restrictions – render certain metaethical views morally relevant. IMPARTIALITY thus renders (some) metaethical theories morally relevant, in a way that has no plausible analogue (as far as I know) in the mathematical case.

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