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**METAETHICAL MINIMALISM: A DEMARCATION,
DEFENSE, AND DEVELOPMENT**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PHILOSOPHY

by

**Aaron
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June 2020

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Abstract

Aaron Franklin

Metaethical Minimalism: A Demarcation, Defense, and Development

The aim of this work is to delineate, develop, and defend the commitments and consequences of metaethical minimalism. Very roughly, this is the position that a commitment to objective moral truths does not require any accompanying ontological commitments. While there are few, if any, who call themselves “metaethical minimalists”, I endeavor to uncover existing articulations of metaethical minimalism which have been presented under different names, attempting to identify the common ground between them. As I interpret the position, all metaethical minimalists are committed to the same positive pair of claims (what I call the Objectivity Thesis): “a) Moral truths are strongly mind-independent; b) there are moral truths.” Taken by itself, however, this pair of claims is not sufficient for differentiating their view from the moral realist’s. Consequently, the minimalist must also articulate that which they are denying about the non-minimalist approach, or what I call the “negative ontological thesis”. I offer my own version of this negative thesis and argue for its dialectical advantages.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I focus my attention on attacks on the viability of metaethical minimalism in the form of two “challenges” that aim to problematize a commitment to objective moral truths absent any accompanying ontological commitment. The big-picture takeaway from these chapters is that minimalism can defend itself by playing to the dialectical advantage I find for it in Chapter 2 as well as by being creative about

minimalist constructions/reworkings of plausible principles/lines of reasoning that seem to contradict it.

The temptation to embrace quietism is strong among minimalists, but in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 I aim to show that there is a positive alternative available for the minimalist interested in developing a full picture of their position. Chapter 5 is aimed at providing an adequate understanding of the distinction between the objects of purely normative thoughts and objects of thoughts about reality. Building on this are Chapters 6 and 7, which argue in favor of an account of the relationship between emotion and evaluative knowledge that is consistent with metaethical minimalism.

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Introduction:

Very little, if anything, is obvious in metaethics. This fact is evidenced by the wide variety of theories populating the metaethical landscape. It is not obvious whether moral propositions are true for the same reasons that non-moral propositions are true or for some other reasons. Nor is it obvious whether moral judgments are sourced from rational intuition, perception, affect, or something else entirely. And so on. The strength and creativity of arguments constructed by contemporary metaethicists for their respective views demonstrate the adaptive pressure they are under to render what is unobvious more perspicuous. Among these competitors is metaethical minimalism. Very roughly, this is the position that a commitment to objective moral truths does not require any accompanying ontological commitments. The aim of this work is to delineate, develop, and defend the commitments and consequences of this position. My goal presently will be to offer a brief general introduction to some of the background reasoning and pattern of thought of those who sympathize with it.¹

The minimalist's view is *minimal* because her account of **that because of which** a moral proposition is true draws on no metaphysical or ontological resources nor any other considerations external to the moral domain.^{2 3} If asked why a particular moral proposition is true, the minimalist will answer with the moral reasoning that best supports

¹ In the following articulation, I set aside the nuances and differences in approach to the metaethical minimalism that I will explore in Chapter 1 and offer instead a vision of it which I take to be both sufficiently ecumenical and reflective of the direction I think is most promising for the position.

² Though my views on the subject differ radically from Scanlon's, I employ "domain"-talk in this paper in a way that he helpfully characterizes in his (2014): "The term 'domain' as I am using it is just a way of referring to the fact that statements can make claims about different subjects: some make claims about the natural world, some make claims about numbers, some make claims about reasons. This is a common-sense idea."

³ Here and in what follows I follow Kramer (2009, 2017) in making the distinction between "second-order" and "domain-external" propositions.

that proposition. If asked whether there are moral facts, the minimalist will answer affirmatively and present as evidence a few examples of obvious moral truths such as, “It is wrong to torture children for fun”. If asked why this proposition is objectively true, a minimalist answer would be that it is objectively true because it should be accepted by all persons, regardless of their personal feelings on the matter. If asked whether there are moral properties, the minimalist would likely answer “yes, because there are actions which are morally forbidden or obligatory, and if you prefer speaking that way, we can say these actions have the properties of forbiddenness or obligatoriness”. The minimalist approach here is to answer seemingly meta-level questions about moral matters with normative commitments rather than ontological commitments.⁴ For the minimalist, answering the property question in the negative, supposing it is a coherent question at all, would amount to a denial that any act is forbidden or obligatory. Such a position could entail that every act is permissible. That the validity of this entailment can be questioned is beside the present point. The key point is that the minimalist takes it that answering the question about moral properties is of a piece with the ongoing project of getting clear on what is morally required of us.⁵

It might be suspected that the minimalist and the non-minimalist theorist are talking past one another, answering two different questions—one about what is morally true and one about what is required to explain this truth. Conversely, there has been some

⁴ See Dworkin (1996) for more of these kinds of responses to what the non-minimalist theorist reads as metaphysical questions.

⁵ To be sure, deliberation about moral properties is a normative deliberation happening at a much higher level of abstraction than deliberation about more concrete moral questions like “Is it wrong to lie to one’s friend about how they look in an outfit?”, but substantive moral commitments still fall out of abstract deliberation, such as if nothing at all is forbidden then everything is permissible. Or so says the minimalist.

question as to the *difference* between the minimalist and the moral realist (one variety of non-minimalist metaethicist); after all, both the realist and the minimalist insist that they accept that there are moral facts, truths, properties, etc..⁶ The concern that the two camps are either indistinguishable or are talking past one another can be alleviated by homing in on the central question to which they offer a diverging response: “Should anything external to the normative domain (i.e. claims the acceptance of which implies more than a normative commitment) be included in an account of *that because of which* moral propositions are true?”. The non-minimalist metaethicists replies in the affirmative and posits the variety of truthmaker they favor in order to complete this account.⁷ The minimalist either firmly replies in the negative or, in taking up a stance I will explore in more detail in Chapter 2, may offer the less committal reply that they simply have no reason to believe that anything external to the moral domain is required for an adequate account.

The minimalist is aligned with the truthmaker theorist in accepting the meaningfulness of talk about moral properties, facts, and their objectivity. The two diverge because of the truthmaker theorist’s belief that claims containing these terms are made external to the moral domain and thereby make some claim for what is true of some external or internal, natural or non-natural normative reality. The truthmaker theorist believes that propositions like, “It is a fact that torturing children for fun is wrong” contain terms which refer⁸ to or are grounded by entities (e.g. the property of wrongness, the very fact mentioned, or whatever object(s) grounds the truth of this fact) which account for the

⁶ See Dreier (2004) for an analysis of this confusion.

⁷ I call this kind of metaethicist the “truthmaker theorist” throughout the chapters that follow.

⁸ Or *attempt* to refer in the case of error theorists, who I will contend are a type of truthmaker theorist.

moral proposition's truth and how we can have knowledge of its truth. That is, they think that in order to make sense of why it is that this domain-internal claim ("torturing children for fun is wrong") is a fact requiring making domain-external claims about the existence of an entity or state of affairs which makes it the case that it is a fact. Depending on the truthmaker theorist's metaethical commitments, this entity or state of affairs could be mental, physical, or non-natural.

In sum, a succinct expression of her position is that the metaethical minimalist does not share a commitment to domain-external truthmakers and will instead offer a domain-internal claim to account for *that because of which* moral truths like "Torturing children for fun is wrong" are facts. This account could be as simple as "Children are innocent, torturing involves inflicting pain, and inflicting pain on innocent persons is always wrong".⁹ The truthmaker theorist does not reject domain-internal justifications and deliberations (unless she is an error-theorist of a particularly strong sort), but she contends that we ought to be after something more than just another set of domain-internal claims when asking whether moral propositions are factual or objective.

In the spirit of virtuous circularity, the version of minimalism presented above is informed by the work done in the chapters that follow, work that I divide into 3 parts: a demarcation (Chapters 1 and 2), a defense (Chapters 3 and 4), and development (Chapters 5, 6, 7) of metaethical minimalism. These tasks are ordered in accordance with what I take

⁹ Again, whether this a sound or adequate line of moral reasoning is not presently at issue.

to be the most illuminating path for the reader, though ideally each part should be comprehensible as a stand-alone project.

1. Demarcation

Chapter 1 is primarily concerned with accurately representing existing articulations of metaethical minimalism, despite the fact that there is not a wide-spread acknowledged allegiance between the thinkers whose articulations I present. In fact, the umbrella term “metaethical minimalism”, while present to a limited extent in the literature, is herein my own term of art and is not used by any of the theorists whose work I use to construct its meaning. While this task is of inherent interest, I undertake this task in order to highlight an apparent point of disagreement among minimalists: what exactly they wish to deny about the ontological/metaphysical commitments of the non-minimalist metaethicist.

As I present the situation, all metaethical minimalists are committed to the same positive pair of claims (what I call the Objectivity Thesis): “a) Moral truths are strongly mind-independent; b) there are moral truths.” Taken by itself, however, this pair of claims is not sufficient for differentiating their view from the moral realist’s. Consequently, the minimalist must also articulate that which they are denying about the non-minimalist approach, or what I call the “negative ontological thesis”. This negative ontological thesis is expressed in a number of different ways. Through Chapter 1, I present a survey of the variations of this negative thesis offered by minimalists. As will become apparent, any

singular defense of metaethical minimalism will require deciding between the right statement of denial with respect to ontological and metaphysical theorizing in metaethics.

At the start of Chapter 2, I offer my own recommendation for what the target of the minimalist's negative ontological thesis should be: what I call the "Moral Truthmaker Conditional" (MTMC): "For any moral proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which ground(s) its truth." The benefit of adopting this as the target of the minimalist's negative thesis concerns the dialectical advantage it offers. I argue that other versions of metaethical minimalism on offer carry a burden of justification for the reason that they marry minimalism with a *rejection* of the belief in MTMC. I argue further that it is not necessary that the minimalist offer this rejection and that their minimalism can consist solely of an attitude of non-acceptance towards the truthmaker theorist's belief in MTMC. The crux of my argument will be that we do not have sufficient reason to believe that the truthmaker's position has prima facie status and that merely holding the attitude of non-acceptance towards propositions which do not have prima facie status does not require an accompanying justification. I call this stance 'bare minimalism'.

2. Defense

In Chapters 3 and 4, I will focus my attention on attacks on the viability of metaethical minimalism, or what I identify in Chapter 2 as the metaethical position which is defined by the non-acceptance of a central presupposition of much of metaethical theorizing: "For any moral proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which make(s) it true" (MTMC).

Though more often than not in metaethical arguments, MTMC is taken as an unargued for *ab initio* truth, some truthmaker theorists do present positive arguments for its acceptance. The most compelling of these arguments are what I will call the respectability challenge from Donelson's (2018) and the norm proliferation challenge from Enoch's (2011), McPherson (2011) and Enoch and McPherson's (2017). The respectability and proliferation challenges are attacks on the viability of minimalism from two opposing directions: on the one hand, the respectability challenge questions whether the minimalist can fully vindicate the truth of propositions for whom there are no truthmakers; on the other hand, the proliferation challenge argues that minimalism turns out to be too permissive with respect to the normative authority of discourses if the existence of truthmakers for constituent propositions is not a constraint on distinctly authoritative discourses.

Chapter 2 offers a defense of metaethical minimalism in the face of the respectability challenge. This is the argument (found in Donelson 2018) that if the minimalist does not accept that there are moral truthmakers, then they can maintain no difference in respectability between moral discourse and those discourses which do not merit our respect an account of their lacking truthmakers. That is, it is not obvious on what grounds the minimalist could maintain their non-acceptance of the existence of moral truthmakers if they are committed both to the possibility that discourses can differ in respectability and that there are true moral propositions. My response to this challenge will involve showing why the reasoning at the core of the respectability challenge is not

decisive in favor of the existence of moral truthmakers in virtue of the fact that one of its central premises is either undermotivated or begs the question against the minimalist.

Chapter 4 addresses what I take to be the challenge it is most pressing for the minimalist to solve, as it is, so far as I can tell, the most commonly cited reason why a minimalist approach to metaethics is unlikely to work. This is the proliferation challenge. This time, the challenge for the minimalist is to explain/vindicate the special, authoritative status moral norms have in our practical deliberations. According to the truthmaker theorist, this special status is explained by the fact that the moral standard (according to which moral norms are true) “tracks normative reality” (Enoch and McPherson 2016). The proliferation challenge does not posit truthmakers to explain the truth of particular moral claims like “Torturing others for fun is wrong”. Instead, it focuses on the truth of a second-order claim about what is morally correct; namely, that these moral claims have distinctive authority in our practical deliberations.

According to the proliferation challenge, the minimalist must either deny that moral norms have distinctive authority or they must accept the existence of a normative reality (i.e. truthmakers) which makes it true that moral norms are distinctly authoritative (thus giving up their minimalism). The proliferation challenge gets its name for the following reason: if the minimalist grasps the first horn of this dilemma, then there are no constraints on the proliferation of competing normative systems to our own. Truthmaker theorists illustrate this point by asking us to imagine an anti-moral or “schmoral” domain of discourse that is 1) equal to the moral domain in coherence and scope, and 2) features in the practical reasoning of an imaginary community in a formally identical way to the way

moral norms feature in our own practical reasoning. According to the schmoral standard, for example, the fact that an action will cause pain stands in favor of performing that action. If neither the schmoral or moral domains' constituent propositions are rendered authoritative by their standard's tracking a normative reality, on no grounds can the minimalist explain the truth of the following: "despite this formal symmetry, it is incorrect to weigh schmoral reasons as heavily as moral reasons, even for schmoral reasoners"? Of course, the proliferation challenge's conclusion is premised upon the notion that, in their non-acceptance of the existence of truthmakers, the minimalist denies themselves any other way to account for the fact that moral norms have a distinctive authority in our deliberations. Resisting this supposition will be the guiding thrust of my defense.

Though importantly different, the respectability challenge and the proliferation challenge are motivated by similar concerns over minimalism's ability to vindicate moral discourse. The former demanded that the minimalist make sense of the fact that moral discourse deserves any consideration in our deliberations whatsoever and the latter demands the minimalist makes sense of the distinctive consideration it deserves. Because of this difference, the solution I offered to resist the respectability challenge will not suffice as an answer to the proliferation challenge.

One big-picture takeaway of Chapters 3 and 4 is that minimalism can defend itself by playing to the dialectical advantage I find for it in Chapter 2 as well as by being creative about minimalist constructions/reworkings of plausible principles/lines of reasoning that seem to contradict it.

3. Development

Chapters 1 and 2 of this work constitute an attempt to construct a well-behaved version of metaethical minimalism—one that reflects a common strain in the work of contemporary metaethicists who are skeptical of metaethical ontology. Chapters 3 and 4 comprise a defense of this thesis from challenges to it that can be found in the contemporary literature. Insofar as metaethical minimalism is a philosophical stance regarding what we can do without moral truthmakers, the work of the preceding chapters can be understood as the construction and defense of a largely *negative* project. While there is nothing wrong with engaging in a philosophical project that is meant solely to dissuade, it is fair to wonder if there is anything else for the metaethical minimalist to do. The temptation to embrace quietism is strong among minimalists, but in Chapters 5 and 6 I aim to show that there is a positive alternative available for the minimalist interested in developing a full picture of their position.

This is more than a matter of mere preference; embracing quietism results in the eliding of some of the most pressing philosophical mysteries left for the minimalist to solve; first, the issue of what secures the difference between truthmaker-backed truths about reality and normative truths; and second, the necessary conditions of our having knowledge of normative truths in the first place.

Chapter 5 is aimed at resolving this first mystery in a way which results in an adequate understanding of the distinction between the objects of purely normative thoughts and objects of thoughts about reality. That is, the non-quietist minimalist wants to be able to draw a distinction between what is real/existent and what is not (and is perhaps only “actual”) using a philosophically sound principle that vindicates their

minimalistic treatment of norms. This is the role Skorupski (2009) wants “the causal condition” to play for minimalism. According to it, the objects of pure normative judgments (value, reasons, etc.) can be the value of a variable in an existential claim and therefore *referred* to unproblematically. However, like propositions, universals, and possible worlds, they are not the kind of thing that can bump into, act upon, or be acted upon by any other object. Consequently, they cannot be measured, weighed, or documented in space and time.

According to the truthmaker theorist’s own “semantic condition,” causal facts about norms place no restriction upon their reality, a reality which is claimed for them by those propositions which quantify over them existentially. According to the causal condition, causal facts entail that norms are not part of reality and therefore do not exist. If the causal condition is a suitable replacement for the semantic condition for the metaethical minimalist, then it must be able to do two things: 1) neatly divide up the domain of discourse into real objects and unreal objects and 2) determine that normative objects fall into the latter category. In the first part of Chapter 5, I argue why the causal condition fails to meet these goals. In its second part, I offer my replacement condition which, I argue, does a better job: the epistemic condition. According to the epistemic condition, something (X) is real/existent insofar as 1) it is, *in principle*, possible for some epistemic agent have non-inferential knowledge of X and 2) a necessary condition upon having this non-inferential knowledge of X is a conception-independent presentation of X to the epistemic agent.

Building on this positive picture are Chapters 6 and 7, which argue in favor of an account of the relationship between emotion and evaluative knowledge that is consistent with metaethical minimalism. That is, it argues that minimalism is consistent with a form of sentimentalism. Broadly construed, moral sentimentalism is the position that human emotions or sentiments play a crucial role in our best normative or descriptive accounts of moral value or judgments thereof. In Chapter 6, I introduce and sketch a defense of a new form of moral sentimentalism I call “Transcendental Sentimentalism”. According to transcendental sentimentalism, having a sentimental response to an object is a necessary condition of the possibility of a subject counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge about that object. In unpacking each component of this position, I argue that it is both distinct from and more explanatorily attractive than the other approaches to explaining the relationship between emotion and moral thought, including what Kauppinen (2014, forthcoming) calls epistemological sentimentalism and explanatory sentimentalism. I conclude by offering a sketch of what I take to be the most promising strategy for demonstrating the truth of transcendental sentimentalism, suggesting an original form of transcendental argument. If successful, this form of argument would establish transcendental sentimentalism by demonstrating that not having a sentimental response to x disqualifies (in the normative sense) a person from counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of x .

In Chapter 7, I draw upon the arguments made in Chapters 5 and 6 in order to present a positive picture of evaluation that incorporates transcendental sentimentalism and metaethical minimalism. I argue that a beneficial consequence of marrying

transcendental sentimentalism with metaethical minimalism is that the former's conception of "sentiment" becomes more developed. I also show how the explanatory demands placed on metaethical minimalism by the epistemic condition can be met by appealing to sentiment. The result of this coupling is a pair of positions that become stronger in virtue of being packaged together. In doing so, I aim to show how each commitment of metaethical minimalism I theretofore have identified can work together in the interest of showcasing not only what metaethics should *not* be concerned about but what positive philosophical contributions a metaethics scrubbed free of moral truthmakers can make. If nothing else, my hope is that the reader comes away from these final 3 chapters, as well as those preceding, believing that there is positive work left for the minimalist—i.e. the minimalist does not have to be a quietist.

Chapter 1: A Survey of Metaethical Minimalism

To my knowledge, there is no philosopher who calls themselves a metaethical minimalist— though there are some who have gone out of their way to eschew the label. Nevertheless, the aim of this chapter is to present the core tenants of metaethical minimalism found in the work of those who prefer other names for their position. Consequently, what follows is more a work of construction than a strict summary of a philosophical position. As is the case with all minimalisms, metaethical minimalism is guided by a belief in what we can do without. Metaethical minimalists believe that we can do without metaphysics and ontology in metaethics. This is not because they believe along with the error theorist that we must answer ontological questions about ethical properties in the negative, but because of a belief that ethics is a category of discourse that does not require a metaphysics or ontology to be understood as trafficking in objective truths.

The aim of this chapter is to identify a common line of thought that runs through the works of a number of different thinkers in order to prepare the ground for a general, working account of metaethical minimalism. As will quickly become apparent, the presentation of this common line of thought varies widely. An ancillary aim will be to prepare the ground for a refinement of the minimalist thesis which will occur in chapter 2.

Describing Metaethical Minimalism: A first pass

In his seminal minimalist work “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe it”, Ronald Dworkin argues, apropos of the essay’s title, in favor of the thesis that moral truth is objective and that accepting this objectivity is obligatory on moral grounds. Consequently, any meta-ethical view that explicitly or implicitly denies this objectivity advocates a commitment to a *morally* dubious position. Any position that takes moral truth to be mind-dependent, for example, is committed to the belief that the fact that slavery is wrong depends on what some set of people think about slavery. This runs contrary to a judgment that seems intuitively correct: that slavery is wrong, no matter what anyone thinks!

So far nothing I have claimed about Dworkin sets him apart from the moral realist who takes moral truth to be grounded in mind-independent reality. For all metaethical minimalists, like for robust moral realists¹⁰, metaethical inquiry begins with objective moral truth. That is, despite all the differences we will find between the ways they object to metaphysics and ontology, minimalists agree on what I will call the objectivity thesis:

The Objectivity Thesis: a) Moral truths are strongly mind-independent. b)

There are moral truths.

This minimal gloss on “objectivity” is where the departure from realism begins: minimalists understand objective truth solely as that which is true independently of what is thought to be true. Following minimalist Matthew Kramer (2009), I use “*strong* mind-independence” to indicate that which obtains independently of not only an individual’s view, but also of the collective views of a group or community. The realist

¹⁰ See Enoch (2011) for an especially clear articulation and defense of this position

thinks that moral truths, if they are strongly mind-independent, must be true in virtue of a mind-external reality. The minimalist, on the other hand, thinks that moral truths, if they are true in this way, are true in virtue of a moral argument:

"The only intelligible case for the 'mind-independence' of some moral judgment is a moral argument showing that it would still be true even if no one thought it was; the only intelligible case against it is a moral argument for the opposite claim."

(Dworkin 2011, p.10)

According to the minimalist, traditional moral realists illicitly build in a grounding in reality as a condition of objectivity. The minimalist declines to begin with this assumption, opting instead for reading into "objective truth" a negative sense—i.e. as merely *not* dependent upon someone thinking it true.

Subpart b) of The Objectivity Thesis sets the minimalist apart from the error theorist who agrees that moral judgments claim to be strongly mind-independent but argues that there are in fact no such moral truths. The minimalist argument against the error theorist is demonstrating the very possibility of metaethical minimalism. That is, if the minimalist is right that there are objective moral truths without any ontological or metaphysical commitments, the motivation for error theory disappears insofar as it is born from a concern about the implausibility of a sui-generis normative reality.

The calling-card of the metaethical minimalist is not their positive commitment to objective moral truth, but rather their negative commitment that The Objectivity Thesis does not entail any robust ontological commitments. This negative ontological thesis is

expressed in a number of different ways. In the following sections of this chapter I present a survey of the variations of this negative thesis offered by minimalists. As will become apparent, any singular defense of metaethical minimalism will require deciding between the right statement of denial with respect to ontological and metaphysical theorizing in metaethics.

Dworkinian Minimalism

Let's return to Dworkin to see an example of one early attempt at constructing a negative ontological thesis:

"Some so-called moral "realists" add to the confusion by... declar[ing] that there really are objective and normative properties or facts in the universe, which is true. But they declare this in language that strives for metaphysical resonance, as if its truth was to be discovered in some philosophical domain other than that of substantive evaluation. If I am right, they share the fallacy of the archimedean, which is to suppose that some sense can be assigned to the supposedly metaphysical claims that is not itself a normative sense, or that there is some way to establish a normative proposition other than through substantive normative arguments..." (1996, p. 127)

Dworkin's reading of metaphysical claims about normative facts is that, to the extent that they are possible to make sense of, they are nothing but restatements of The Objectivity Thesis with a little added flair. This is a consequence of his position that not only are metaethical thesis non-neutral with respect to substantive normative commitments, but

there is also *no sense* to be made of them “that is not itself a normative sense.” That is, his hostility to them as claims does not amount to a denial of their truth, but to the fact that metaphysicians and ontologists want to understand them as pointing to something external to normative or moral discourse.

Implicit in Dworkin’s argumentation is the premise that metaphysics and ontology play no part in the grounding of moral truth. This is apparently a position born of an epistemological point: moral judgments are true in virtue of what we discover not by observation of reality but by “substantive evaluation.” Philosophers trick themselves into thinking something is revealed about external reality as a result of being susceptible to metaphor:

“What about the baroque claims I added at the end, about moral “facts” being “out there” in an “independent” realm? These are not things people actually say... But we can make sufficient sense of them, as things people might say, by understanding them as inflated, metaphorical ways of repeating what some of the earlier further claims say more directly: that the wrongness of abortion does not depend on anyone’s thinking it wrong, for example.” (*ibid*, p.99)

This account of how realists get into the habit of committing themselves to more than they need to is common among minimalists. Something about the allure of our picture of objective empirical truth leads the realist to think that all instances of objective truth must share an analogous metaphysical and ontological picture.

What is distinctive about Dworkinian minimalism in comparison to other articulations we will review is a willingness to self-describe as a realist:

“ I regard my view of morality as a “realist” one (though, given the notorious ambiguity of the term, not much turns on the attribution)” (*ibid*, p.127)

I will argue that the minimalist should avoid this label for the purpose of articulating how their position differs from the robust realist’s and why moral claims differ from empirical claims. However, Dworkin reads “realism” as just a way of restating The Objectivity

Thesis:

“But by itself the claim that moral convictions correspond to reality is just redundant. ‘The proposition that abortion is wrong corresponds to a fact’ can be understood as just a wordy way of saying that abortion is wrong.” (*ibid*, p.103),

It is possible that Dworkin himself began to rethink this (and any other) label for his view by the time he wrote *Justice for Hedgehogs* (2011). Therein he offers this observation about his own position:

“In what philosophical pigeonhole does it rest? **Is it a kind of moral realism?** Or constructivism? Or even anti-realism? Is it itself a nonmoral metaphysical theory? Or a quietist or minimalist theory that just ignores rather than really escapes troublesome metaphysics? **None of these labels fits exactly— or exactly doesn’t fit—** because each is stained with the mistaken assumption that there are important philosophical questions about value that are not to be answered with value judgments.” (p.11, my emphases)

However, Dworkin still seems to think that describing moral facts as reflective of reality may be fine in the course of engaging in regular moral discourse because its meaning is not misunderstood in that context. What is unclear is whether he regards this as permissible

because “reality” is a term that has multiple senses depending on the discourse in which it appears or because making reference to moral reality is to speak in metaphor.

Matthew Kramer, who is strongly influenced by Dworkin’s minimalism, also calls himself a realist. Like Dworkin, he thinks that ontological and metaphysical claims about moral truths are claims about substantive moral matters. Unlike Dworkin, Kramer has an account of the distinctive role that such claims play in normative deliberations: they are ways of articulating abstract moral principles. Abstract moral propositions like, “There is a mind-independent moral reality” are to be contrasted with concrete moral propositions like “Inflicting pain on others for fun is wrong”:

“Attentiveness to the distinction between abstract ethical propositions and concrete ethical propositions is of crucial importance throughout this book, for the perception of a fundamental divide between meta-ethics and substantive ethics has been very widespread among philosophers largely because the character of abstract ethical propositions as ethical propositions has been neglected.” (p.4)

The distinction between purportedly “meta”-ethical claims and first-order ethical propositions is not correctly regarded as a distinction between claims which are made external to moral discourse and those that are made internal to it. Rather, the distinction is one of specificity—the debate over meta-ethical matters is a debate over the most abstract principles with moral substance. According to Kramer,

“Whereas most meta-ethical theses are logically neutral among a vast array of concrete moral stances, none of them (or virtually none of them) is logically neutral among all such stances.” (p.5)

While the position that “there is a mind-independent moral reality” is neutral with respect to the propositions “Abortion is impermissible” and “Abortion is permissible”, it is not neutral with respect to the moral propositions “What is the right action depends on what someone thinks” and “There are actions which are right irrespective of what anyone thinks”.

Kramer is aligned with Dworkin in thinking that determining the right abstract moral theses is not a matter of metaphysical theorizing, but of normative deliberation: “The key questions of moral ontology and moral epistemology are abstract moral questions. To address them adequately, we have to have recourse to basic moral considerations...” (200). However, care must be taken here. One could imagine a non-minimalist position according to which abstract metaethical questions are answered by engaging in moral deliberation, and these answers justify domain-external ontological and metaphysical claims. This is not Kramer’s position. Regarding his many claims that resemble those of the robust moral realist, Kramer says, “[M]y invocations of propositions and truth and facts (and other such things) are all minimalist in tenor” (29). Were he to endorse a robust interpretation of these invocations, he would, in also endorsing moral realism, imply a commitment to metaethical claims that are made external to and about moral discourse.

Kramer’s view is Dworkinian because of his insistence that it is a *realist* view. The title of his work, *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine*, belies his motivation for adopting the label. It is, in effect, a restatement of The Objectivity Principle, which is itself understood as a moral principle by Kramer:

"The existential mind-independence of basic moral principles is strong. Their continued existence as correct principles of morality does not depend on the continuation of the mental functioning of any people individually or collectively."
(pp. 26-27)"

Questions arise for this kind of approach; including, is "existence" generally a minimal notion or does it just have a minimal sense in the context of moral discourse? A closer look at Kramer's statement of his position reveals that he regards "reality" and "existence" as having a different, non-causal sense in the moral context:

"Given that the reality of any moral property is always itself a moral matter, and given that in countless circumstances there will be dispositive moral reasons for the reality of various moral properties, the causal inefficacy of such properties is no bar to their existence as such." (pp. 201-202)

Kramer and Dworkin feel at liberty to regard their views as realist because they find an appropriate use of the term "existence" in discourse-internal deliberation.

For Kramer and Dworkin, their adoption of the "realist" label makes it somewhat complicated to state concisely and forcefully what they deny about ontological and metaphysical theorizing in metaethics. They are unwilling to deny that there is a distinctive normative or moral reality, only that when they do say it they mean something different from the robust moral realist or the moral naturalist. Their negative ontological thesis, then, is more precisely regarded as a two-pronged negative *semantic* thesis: i) that there are no meta-level claims about ethical discourse that are neutral with respect to ethical commitments, and ii) that claims that philosophers suppose have implications about a

discourse-external ontology, in fact, do not, but are rather restatements of substantive positions internal to ethical discourse. The Dworkinian minimalist thinks that we are incapable of making truly neutral claims about the external grounds of ethical propositions even if we tried—such an act would entail “‘taking up sides’ in [a] substantive moral dispute” (Dworkin, 101) and nothing more.

Putnam’s Ontology-free Ethics

In his work *Ethics without Ontology*, Hillary Putnam takes up a pragmatist stance that is plausibly included under the “metaethical minimalist” heading. One difficulty in pinning down Putnam’s precise position is born of his idiosyncratic use of “objective”. In a chapter entitled “Ontology: an Obituary”, Putnam asks,

“If ethical claims are **objective**—or, better, to use the language Conant employed in describing my position, if they are bonafide instances of assertoric discourse, forms of reflection that are as fully governed by norms of truth and validity as any other form of cognitive activity—how is it that we so often can’t agree on which ones are true?” (74-75, my emphasis)

His answer is that there is an important difference between claims about ethical matters and empirical matters; only the latter involves descriptions of objects. However, Putnam concludes that this is not dispositive of the objectivity (rooted in some other sense than that of a literal “object”) of the former, as is possible to tell from the way these claims function in our discourse:

“[I]t is right that certain crucial ethical statements are not descriptions, but that is no reason for classifying them as outside the range of the notions of truth and falsity, good and bad argument, and the like... (77-78).

The first component of the minimalist’s objectivity thesis is consistent with Putnam’s view only if he believes that, in addition to being capable of being “true” and “correct”, ethical claims are mind-independently true.

Things become simultaneously clearer and more complicated by Putnam’s discussion of the “existence” of value, during which he indicates that the objectivity he has in mind is similar to what the Platonists attempt to explain using metaphysics:

“I have claimed that ethics and mathematics can and do possess objectivity without being about sublime or intangible objects, such as “Platonic forms” or “abstract entities,” and that the idea that “exist” has a unique and determinate meaning, one cast in stone, so to speak, is mistaken.” (2)

Putnam’s primary target in his argument against ontology in ethics is what he regards as a Platonistic stance towards objective truth. The idea of “existence”, especially as it relates to value, that such a stance advocates is unnecessarily inflationary:

“But why will I be rejecting inflationary (for example, “Platonic”) metaphysics? My answer is that I hold, with the pragmatists and again with Wittgenstein, that pragmatic pluralism does not require us to find mysterious and supersensible objects behind our language games; the truth can be told in language games that we actually play when language is working, and the inflations that philosophers

have added to those language games are examples, as Wittgenstein said—using a rather pragmatist turn of phrase—of “the engine idling.” (22).

This coupled with the idea that ethical claims are objective secures Putnam’s place among metaethical minimalists, though there is no evidence that he has any tendency to call his view “realist”, like Dworkin and Kramer call their own.

Attending to this difference between Putnam’s view and the Dworkinians’ and what is distinctive about Putnam’s is that it allows us to identify the target of his version of the negative ontological thesis: the idea that ethical claims are descriptions;

“If there is anything that today’s “naturalist” (in the sense of scientific) metaphysicians tend to overlook, it seems to me, it is that judgments to the effect that such-and-such is a good reason are not descriptions.” (65)

Later, he claims, “‘Terrorism is criminal’ and ‘Wife-beating is wrong’ aren’t descriptions; they are simply evaluations that convey moral condemnation” (73). While this may appear close to verging on non-cognitivism, according to Putnam it is not correct to say that in making ethical claims we do not make assertions, or that we do not make assertions about what exists. So long as we keep in mind that the sense of “existence” we employ when making normative claims is unlike that in use when offering descriptions of objects, there is nothing wrong with interpreting utterances like “There exists a moral reason to refrain from lying” as a literal assertion of existence. Putnam’s negative ontological thesis is thus the claim that, while it is right to say that value, reasons, and norms exist, they do not exist in a way such that we can offer descriptions of them like our descriptions of reality.

Parfit's Non-metaphysical Cognitivism

Derek Parfit's, in *On What Matters* defends a position he calls "Non-metaphysical cognitivism" that is similar to Putnam's in that it relies on a "multi-sense" view of existence according to which there are least two meanings of "exist": one reserved for empirical claims and one reserved for normative claims. However, whereas Putnam premises his position upon the denial that normative claims describe, Parfit's route to minimalism relies on a detour through a debate over the ontological status of possible states of affairs. We should have no qualms about regarding value, reasons, and norms as existent in a different sense than natural objects exist because there is no analogous problem with claiming that there are possibilities that exist in a different way than the way that actualities exist:

"We ought, I believe, to accept a different view. According to what I shall call Possibilism: There are some things that are never actual, but are merely possible. There are some things that might happen but never actually happen, and some things that might exist but never actually exist... But Possibilists like me need not believe that merely possible entities are real. Loux defines Actualism as the view 'that only what actually exists is real'. But Possibilists can agree that only what is actual and real is actual and real. We are Possibilists because we believe that there are also some things that are merely possible, rather than being actual and real."

(467)

If Parfit and the possibilists are right, there is a discourse we participate in every day that relies on an intuitive distinction between what is real and actual, on the one hand, and what exists only as a possibility, on the other.

Such a position, Parfit believes, demonstrates that the assumption that there must be a metaphysical or ontological state of affairs which accompanies every fact about what exists is unfounded:

“Just as there are some things that we *could* have done, there are some things that we *should* have done. And there are some things that we have reasons to believe, and to want, and to do. These claims, we can add, do not conflict with what Russell called our robust sense of reality. Unlike entities that are merely possible rather than actual, such normative properties and truths do not have a *lesser* ontological status. Like numbers and logical truths, these normative properties and truths have *no* ontological status.” (487).

Importantly, Parfit thinks there *are* normative truths (and that he has identified the most important ones). The minimalist stance he takes up is minimalist in the sense I have employed the term insofar as he believes that there are such truths while denying that there is an ontological ground for them: “When such claims assert that there are certain things, or that these things exist, these claims do not imply that these things exist in some ontological sense” (479).

At the outset of this section, I said that one challenge facing metaethical minimalists was making it clear what precisely they are denying about the ontological, i.e. naming the target of their negative ontological thesis. For Dworkinian minimalists this target is the very meaningfulness of ontological claims about the normative and for Putnam this target was descriptivism about ethical judgments. For Parfit, the target seems to be the very notion that he should be required to have the conversation at all:

“When we claim that there are things that we could have done, these claims don’t commit us to the existence of strange entities as parts of reality... These properties and truths are not, in relevant senses, either actual or merely possible, or either real or unreal. In asking whether there are such normative truths, we need not answer ontological questions. There are, I believe, some such truths, which are as true as any truth could be.” (487)

Again, recall that Parfit’s move is to say that what he has claimed about possible states of affairs applies by analogy to normative properties. At points he extends this line of thought to apply to abstract entities like numbers or logical truths:

“When we are trying to form true beliefs about numbers or logical truths, we need not answer ontological questions. As one way to sum up these claims, we can say that, though there are these numbers and truths, these entities exist in a non-ontological sense.” (481)

The philosophical work done by Parfit’s repeated assertion that “we need not answer ontological questions” is difficult to pin down, especially if it is taken as a meta-philosophical judgment about the worthiness of focusing our attention on the present issue. Is it that such questions need not be answered because they should be regarded as meaningless? Or is it simply unnecessary that we worry about answering such questions in the course of determining whether something is a normative (or logical, or mathematical) truth or not?

Parfit evidently prefers a quietist approach to ontological questions. According to this quietist approach, my concern that the negative ontological thesis should be made

more precise is ill-founded. Instead, all the minimalist needs is their positive component to the objectivity thesis perhaps coupled with an “and that’s all folks!” added at the end as an inoculation against the temptation to theorize further.

Even if Parfit is correct that any ontological questions about normative, logical, or mathematical truths need not be answered, there is at least one answer that the minimalist owes their non-minimalist interlocutor: why is it that for the truths of some domains we *do* need to answer ontological questions and for others we do not? Put another way, it is fair for those curious about minimalism to ask “What mistake am I making when asking ontological questions about normative truths or thinking that such questions require answers?”. The negative ontological thesis is an answer to *this* question. For Dworkinians, the mistake being made is supposing that the ethical discourse can be theorized about using ethically-neutral, discourse-external claims. For Putnam, the mistake the non-minimalist makes is identifying evaluations or normative judgments as descriptions.

This much is clear: Parfit believes that it is a mistake to think “exists” has a univocal ontological sense. Furthermore, he is comfortable saying of normative properties that “these entities exist in a non-ontological sense” (481). So, any attempted construction of Parfit’s negative ontological thesis cannot use the “existence” of normative properties or truthmakers as its target. At the same time he makes it clear that he is no realist about possible states of affairs or (by analogy) normative properties:

“When we claim that there are things that we could have done, these claims don’t commit us to the existence of strange entities as parts of reality...” (487).

The question for the metaethical minimalist is whether there is any coherent formulation of their position that denies that there is any normative component to “reality” while affirming the (non-ontological) “existence” of normative properties.

Scanlon’s Domain-Relative Minimalism

T.M. Scanlon, in his *Being Realistic About Reasons*, denies that his metaethical view is “minimalist.”¹¹ Irrespective of how he employs the term, Scanlon’s view is minimalist in a sense relevant to our current task in that he affirms that there are objective moral truths (about reasons for action) while denying *something* about ontological or metaphysical implications of this commitment. Furthermore, he makes it clear that he has the *negative* sense of “objective” (discussed above) in mind when clarifying his commitments:

“A subject matter is independent of us, and judgments about it are objective in a further sense, if these judgments are judgment-independent and, in addition, the standards for assessing such judgments do not depend on what we, collectively, have done, chosen, or adopted, and would not be different had we done, chosen, or adopted something else. Call this choice-independence... I believe that many truths about reasons for action are both judgment-independent and choice-independent.” (94)

¹¹ “My view is not minimalist” (28).

“Choice-independence” is Scanlon’s term for a stronger mind-independence that builds in the negative claim that choice-independent truths are also not dependent on there being some stipulated or conventional principle which implies their truth.

Scanlon, like normative realists, is comfortable talking about “normative properties” and facts about reasons, though for Scanlon claims involving these terms are moves made within a particular domain of discourse and ought to be understood relative to the standards of that domain.

“[My view] holds that statements with all these domains are capable of truth and falsity, and that the truth values of statements about one domain, insofar as they do not conflict with statements of some other domain, are properly settled by the standards of the domain that they are about... So a domain is better understood in terms of the kinds of claims it involves, and hence in terms of concepts that it deals with, such as number, set, physical object, reason, or morally right action.” (19)

According to the standards of the domain of claims about physical objects, existential commitments to such objects imply their robust or ‘thick’ existence.

“Claims about the existence of objects in the spatio-temporal world do seem to involve a ‘thick’ or ‘robust’ idea of existence. But the ‘thickness’ of these existential claims is provided by the idea of that world itself. For physical objects to exist is for them to have spatio-temporal location, to have various physical properties, and to interact causally with other objects. The relevant idea of “thickness” is thus domain-specific” (28).

Existential claims made about normative properties or reasons for actions do not imply such thick existence according to Scanlon.

Scanlon apparently is also moved by the same “queerness” concerns that the idea of a thick existence of non-natural properties gives rise to:

“To put this point in a slightly different way, our ontological commitments in this general sense do not represent a claim on our part about what the world contains, in any meaningful sense of “the world.”... if we respond to this first worry by denying that numbers, say, are part of the natural world, while still insisting that they are part of “the world” we invite questions about what this shadowy “world” is to which numbers and perhaps other non-spatial entities all belong. It is better to avoid such questions altogether.” (24)

At the end of this passage, we see Scanlon express a quietist attitude similar to Parfit’s. However, unlike with Parfit’s view, it is possible to pin down the reasons such questions are misguided according to Scanlon’s view. The mistaken presupposition such questions rely on is an “idea” of existence that cuts across all domains of discourse. According to Scanlon, there is no domain-transcendent existence that is entailed by all domain-internal existential claims. This idea of domain-transcendent existence is the most plausible target of Scanlon’s negative ontological thesis, were we to construct one for him. That is, the mistake the moral realist makes is inferring from any existential claims about normative properties that some state of affairs obtains in a natural or “shadowy” world. This is a mistake because there is only ever a domain-internal idea of existence conveyed by these claims.

One significant worry about this domain-internal approach to “existence” is that it appears to allow for as many kinds of existents (and their various ways of existing) as there are domains. Scanlon admits this consequence:

“According to my view, as long as this way of talking was well defined, internally coherent, and did not have any presuppositions or implications that might conflict with those of other domains, such as science, by accepting these statements we would be committed to the existence of things quantified over in the existential statements counted as true in this way of talking. They would be among our “ontological commitments.” Can we take seriously an idea of existence that comes so cheaply? My answer is that the question about such entities is not whether they really exist. This question is settled by the standards of the domain, assuming, as I have stipulated, that their existence does not entail implausible claims about other domains, such as the natural world.” (27)

Born of this worry is one of the most pressing challenges to metaethical minimalism, one that will be the focus of a subsequent chapter (4). Namely, that this form of minimalism allows for the possibility of the existence of “counter-reasons”--a coherent set of reasons that count in favor of performing morally repugnant actions. Though any form of metaethical minimalism will need to have an answer to this challenge, our present question concerns minimalism’s negative ontological thesis: is there a preferred way of articulating the negative ontological thesis that avoids or lessens the concerns about the proliferation of ontological commitments?

Skorupski's Cognitive Irrealism

Let's suppose we want to answer "yes" to the preceding question. According to the survey offered so far, the minimalist has a few routes open to them: deny that any seemingly ontological claims about normativity are actually claims about ontology, deny that we are in the business of describing when asserting that normative properties exist, or deny that we should even entertain ontological questions when they arise about such existence-claims. The strategy pursued by John Skorupski differs from these approaches by involving an explicit denial that there is any sense in which norms or normative properties exist. The reason why Skorupski is not a moral skeptic is that he affirms that *there are* objective reasons for action (or what he calls "reason-relations") and that we have beliefs about them. However, reasons are not in the category of that which is potentially real at one time/place and not real at another time/place; rather they are, when actual, "*irreal*." Put another way, if Skorupski is right, the question "Are moral reasons real or are there none of them at all?" presents a false dichotomy—the unrepresented possibility is that moral reasons are not real but it is true that there are actually quite a few of them.

While it is true that we can existentially quantify over reasons, Skorupski (unlike Putnam, Parfit, and Scanlon) does not take this to imply the *existence* of reasons. To claim of something that can be quantified over is to make a semantic claim; to claim of something that it is *real* is to make a further claim about the causal role it can play:

"The real is that which has causal standing. How widely the notion of cause should be understood is a further philosophical question; but *however* widely we understand it, I argue, this criterion makes reason relations irreal. It does not

follow that propositions about them cannot be true, and it does not follow that reason relations are fictions or constructs. They are what they are, independently of what we think they are. Their objectivity is the unconditioned condition on which the Normative view explains the possibility of knowledge and freedom.”

(30)

Here we see Skorupski reiterate the minimalist understanding of objectivity as mind-independence. Any minimalist who wants to regard reasons or value as lacking existence must find some way of distinguishing discourse about normative matters from discourse about the fictitious. True statements of the latter are true in virtue of some choice or fact about minds. The same is not true of the former.

Skorupski makes a compelling argument against what he calls “the semantic condition” by appealing to ordinary language. He points out that the ease with which we understand sentences such as “(1) There are characters in War and Peace who do not exist and characters who do” shows that we have an understanding of what “there is” that is different from our understanding of what “exists”. Those who advocate for an ontological interpretation of all existential quantification are at odds with this ordinary understanding:

“[A]ccording to the semantic condition, if we assert [(1)] we must ‘admit’ all the characters in War and Peace into ‘our ontology’. If we don’t want to admit them we must find some other way to regiment these sentences, in which no variable ranging over purely fictional characters occurs. This is a metaphysical not a semantic claim. What basis is there for it? As just noted, it is hard to see a basis for

it other than the thought that whatever one can think and talk about is real. But why on earth should we think such an extraordinary thing?" (423)

This does not mean there is nothing of importance conveyed by existential quantification: "to be" for Skorupski is not to exist, rather "to be is to be actual, to be actual is to be the value of a possible variable" (425). *There are* actual fictions, numbers, propositions, sets, and reasons, but none of these are existent in the way a natural object is.

Skorupski substitutes the semantic condition for what he calls "the causal condition"; "[T]he real is whatever has the power of acting or being acted upon" (426). He intentionally keeps the notion of "power" vague so as to not beg the question in favor of naturalism. While beliefs about reasons, value, and norms are real and causally interact with other objects, it is not clear that these normative items are themselves capable of causally interacting with anything. The same can be said of numbers: while my belief that 3 is a prime number can cause me to write it down on the list I am making of prime numbers, it would be strange to think that the number itself or its primeness has the power of acting upon objects. The causal condition allows Skorupski to make a principled division between the real and the unreal. In a refreshing change from the argumentative strategy of many non-realists, he does not rely on an appeal to our intuitions regarding the "queerness" of a purely normative reality.

Skorupski's negative ontological thesis is bolder relative to those of his minimalist peers: reasons do not exist nor are they in the category of that which is possibly real. He does not wish to reserve a weaker "non-ontological" idea of existence for the normative, nor does he dismiss the very debate over the ontology of the normative as misguided.

Despite this apparent difference, it is not clear why any of the minimalists surveyed would regard Skorupski's minimalism as giving up too much. After all, what sets Skorupski apart from the moral skeptic is the same thing that sets all metaethical minimalists apart from them: a belief that *there are* actual, objective (mind-independent) reasons for action. While his position itself makes for what, in my assessment, is the most plausible articulation of metaethical minimalism currently on offer, Skorupski's reliance on the causal condition is not without its problems. Critiquing this argument and offering another condition in its stead will be the focus of chapter 5.

So far, my aim has been to present metaethical minimalism as it exists in the wild; despite the differences in approach we found, what justifies my grouping these positions under one category is a shared commitment to objective normative truths and a denial of *something* about the ontological implications of this commitment. Though difficult to prove, I suspect that the differences we find between these minimalists reflect a divergence of strategy regarding the proper articulation of the minimalist position, rather than a difference of substance. Despite the fact that Skorupski does not think it is correct to regard truths about reasons for action as "facts", I do not believe he would take issue with Scanlon's stance on moral facts, even when he says "A view of the kind I am calling Reasons Fundamentalism, which takes there to be **facts** about which things are reasons..." (9). This is because we can plausibly interpret Scanlon here to be affirming the objective truth of reason-propositions and understand him as favoring a minimalist interpretation of the term "fact". Similarly, while Putnam is careful to reject the notion that normative

judgments are “descriptions”, his minimalist peers have no problem employing the term liberally in a way that does not commit them to the idea that normative judgments paint a picture of some occurrent reality-inhering state of affairs. The question is where to draw the line of minimalist interpretation of terms; what is at stake in properly answering this question is the ability to construct a coherent minimalist position.

In the next chapter, I will follow Skorupski’s lead and argue that metaethical minimalists would do best by using their negative ontological thesis to target the idea that asserting an objective normative truth necessarily entails the existence of a normative portion of reality. I argue that taking aim at the notion that true normative propositions have truthmakers has numerous dialectical advantages and allows minimalists to continue using “fact”, “description”, and “property” without issue. In chapter 5, I depart from Skorupski by arguing that the causal condition is inadequate and by replacing it with another criterion which allows a principled distinction between truths which do require truthmakers and those which do not.

Chapter 2: On the Variety of Metaethical Minimalisms and the Burdens they Carry

My aim in this chapter is to analyze the justificatory burdens of a minimalist approach in metaethics. Ultimately, I will conclude that some of the versions of metaethical minimalism on offer presently do require justification for the reason that they can be more plausibly interpreted as accompanying the minimalist approach with a rejection of a central premise of truthmaker theory. However, I will argue that it is not necessary that the minimalist be burdened with justifying this rejection, and that their minimalism can consist solely of an attitude of non-acceptance of this central premise. This *bare* minimalism, I will argue, is a rationally permissible default position, or starting point, in metaethical discourse. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this latter view for metaethical inquiry.

It might be thought that the minimalist's chief theoretical rival is the moral realist. However, I contend that the distinctiveness of the minimalist approach should be understood as a lack of endorsement of a belief that the realist shares with many anti-realists; i.e., contra minimalism, the majority of metaethical theories accept, either implicitly or explicitly, the following premise:

Moral Truthmaker Conditional (MTMC): *“For any moral proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which ground(s) its truth.”*¹²

¹² I have chosen not to include any mention of necessity in my rendering of the truthmaker conditionals in this essay, this is not to suggest that I have a settled position on Truthmaker Necessitarianism, only that I wish not to wade into the waters of whether truthmaker theory implies that contingent truths do not have truthmakers or whether all truths are necessary truths. See e.g. Armstrong (2004), Rodriguez-Pereya (2006), and MacBride (2013) for more discussion of this issue.

By “truthmakers”, truthmaker theorists mean entities or states of affairs existing in natural or non-natural reality whose existence and accessibility explain the truth and knowability of, in the context of metaethics, moral propositions. Though I will argue that MTMC is neither common sense nor has *prima facie* status¹³, its content is relatively easily understood. Just as my statement “There is a red ball in the Oval Office” is true only if there exists a red ball somewhere in the Oval Office at the time I make this statement, MTMC claims that there is something(s) which play an analogous role to that played by the red-ball-in-the-Oval-Office state of affairs for moral propositions. Many thousands of pages have been written in efforts to present the most plausible candidates for “some moral truthmaker(s)” quantified over in MTMC’s consequent. Some truthmaker theorists think that these “somethings” are not merely *analogous* with truthmakers of empirical judgments, but turn out to be the same sort of natural entities. Other truthmaker theorists argue that moral truthmakers must be non-natural or irreducibly normative to explain certain distinctive features of moral judgments (e.g. their action-guidedness, their objectivity, their authority, etc.). In the latter group are those anti-realists who accept MTMC and employ it, sometimes implicitly, as a premise in arguments aimed at showing that moral judgments are wholly false or true only figuratively or in a fictional sense.¹⁴

Of the theories populating the metaethical landscape, minimalism stands alone in its non-acceptance of MTMC--this is because minimalism is *defined* by a willingness to believe the antecedent of MTMC without affirming its consequent. Insofar as this is a minority position, perhaps even fringe, it might be thought that the minimalist would

¹³ By “prima facie status” I mean the status of being a proposition which should be accepted until being given reason to doubt it, believe it false, or not accept it.

¹⁴ See Mackie (1990), Joyce (2006) and (2009), and Streumer (2017)

need to do a great deal of work to justify this lack of acceptance. I will argue that this is incorrect. Even if MTMC is true, it is not *obviously* true. That is, we should not treat MTMC as having *prima facie* status, supposing that it ought to be believed until sufficient reason has been given for its rejection. I will also argue that MTMC is not a piece of common sense nor does it fly in the face of common sense to not accept it. However, *accepting* MTMC does not fly in the face of common sense nor does it flout that which has *prima facie* status. On the basis of this argumentation, I will conclude that the non-acceptance of MTMC is a rationally permissible default position which is not burdened by justification *ab initio* any more than any other default position. However, I will first discuss the state of non-acceptance to which I have been referring and how it relates to belief and disbelief. I will argue that these three propositional attitudes differ in required justification depending on the *prima facie* status of the proposition which is their object.

By “lack of acceptance” and “non-acceptance” I have in mind an attitude of non-belief towards a proposition that can result only after considering the proposition’s content. It might be thought that rocks exhibit a lack of acceptance towards MTMC, but this would be in a different sense than the minimalist’s lack of acceptance on account of rocks inability to assess and consider MTMC’s plausibility. Non-acceptance is also different from disbelief in that someone who disbelieves P *believes* that P is not the case, whereas someone who does not accept P merely *does not believe* P is the case after consideration of P. Both the person who disbelieves P and the person who does not accept

P are rightly categorized as ‘non-believers’ of P. So defined, I offer the following two claims about the propositional attitude of non-acceptance as it relates to its justification:

- 1) When P has no status as a prima facie truth or prima facie falsehood, the attitude of non-acceptance towards P is not burdened by the need for justification when taken as a default position in an inquiry about P or some related matter for which P has some implication.
- 2) If challenged, a sufficient defense of the default position taken up in 1) is that the person who takes up this position is not aware of any evidence or reasoning which would rationally require them to believe or disbelieve P.¹⁵

If MTMC does not have prima facie status, then the minimalist who does not accept it is not burdened with justifying this non-acceptance as a default position.

However, this lack of burden does not apply to all minimalists, as many MTMC non-believers in metaethics go further than mere non-acceptance and offer a *rejection* of MTMC aimed at rationally grounding disbelief of MTMC. I will call this variety of minimalism “Minimalism+”. Minimalism+ is rampant among those views which I take to be plausibly categorized under the “Minimalist” genus, including most, if not all, of those discussed in Chapter 1.

There are various strategies the Minimalist+ may employ to justify their rejection of MTMC, but most often they rely on one of three following sets of premises: **1)** The only sense that can be assigned to any meaningful metaethical claim is a normative sense,

¹⁵ Sometimes non-acceptance does require justification. Having an attitude of non-acceptance calls out for justification when its object is a proposition which is obvious, common sense, or in some other way a prima facie truth. Plausibly, if I do not accept that there needs to exist a red ball in the Oval Office for the judgment “There is a red ball in the Oval Office” to be true, then I need to justify this non-acceptance.

not a metaphysical or ontological sense. This is because all meaningful second-order claims are really normative claims in baroque disguise and debates over their truth are really substantive normative debates. Therefore, insofar as MTMC is a claim about morality with intended non-normative sense, it either should be rejected as nonsensical or restated so as to reveal its normative sense. This is Ronald Dworkin's position found in his (1996) and (2011); **2)** The only things which truly exist are natural objects or properties, and while moral judgments are true, the standards for truth in the moral domain differ than the standards of truth in the empirical domain; only according to the standards of the latter domain do its propositions require truthmakers. This is Scanlon's position articulated in his (2014); **3)** There is no explanatory need to posit moral truthmakers because moral judgments do not represent states of affairs and are instead expressions of non-cognitive psychological attitudes. This is the expressivist non-cognitivist position most commonly associated with Blackburn (1985), (1998) and Gibbard (1992).

When assessing the viability of minimalism as a competitor among metaethical positions, it is a common practice in metaethics to do so by assessing the soundness of the minimalist's rejection of MTMC. As evidenced from the sets of premises above, there are many targets of contention one can find in the Minimalist+'s rejection, not the least of which are the claims that there are only natural objects/properties, the claim that moral judgments gain their sense in some other way than representing some state(s) of affairs, and the plausibility of the entire expressivist non-cognitivist programme.

The fact that metaethical minimalists, so far as I can tell, have always accompanied their non-acceptance of MTMC with an argument for its rejection gives, I aim to show,

the mistaken impression that the minimalist stance requires justification in the same way that any other metaethical theory requires justification. As a consequence of this impression, minimalism is often treated as a meta-ethical theory. In their (2016), Kremm and Shafer say that “[Minimalist] claims rest on a controversial view of the meaning of terms like ‘true’ and ‘fact’. And even if one accepts that minimalism is the correct theory of our ordinary use of these terms, one could go on to argue that there are also more philosophical uses of them...” (4). The “controversial view” Kremm and Schafer refer to is that notions like “true” and “fact” cannot be used to raise questions about the nature of ethical discourse, but are instead notions which are of meaningful use only in first-order moral discourse. Notice also that they regard minimalism a “theory” of the meaning of these terms which disqualifies their use in second-order questions. This interpretation corresponds to the first set of premises for the rejection of MTMC offered above.

Another example can be found in Donelson (2018), according to whom “[the minimalist] arrives at [her] view because she rejects as suboptimal all the other solutions” and, consequently, that “assessing whether minimalism is to be preferred to its rivals is to take stock of its supposed theoretical advantages vis-a-vis those rivals” (127). Rejection is front and center in this account of minimalism, and minimalism’s soundness is taken to be entirely the soundness of this rejection of MTMC as it compares with the soundness of the truthmaker theories that presuppose it.

Minimalism +’s justificatory burdens are relatively heavy for the following reason: though ultimately MTMC may turn out to be false, it is not the case that it should be treated as false until proven otherwise. Therefore, the tenability of a minimalist’s disbelief

towards MTMC is dependent upon the soundness of their rejection of it.¹⁶ That is, Minimalism+ must be justified.

The observation central to my reinterpretation of the dialectic between minimalists and MTMC-believers is this: it is open to the minimalist to *not accept* MTMC while offering nothing in the way of an argument for its *rejection*. Such a stance would amount to an acceptance of the truth of moral propositions without an acceptance that there exist truthmakers for them. I call this stance “bare minimalism” in order to contrast it with Minimalism+. Distinguishing these two kinds of minimalism allows us to see which variety of minimalism has dialectical burdens and in virtue of what they carry that burden. According to my account of the attitude of non-acceptance which individuates it according to its justificatory burdens, bare minimalism is a rationally permissible default position if MTMC is not a *prima facie* truth.

Much of the above analysis has moved rather quickly and, though I hope what I have said is relatively intuitive, it is fair to request that I supply evidence that my division of propositional attitudes and their justificatory burdens is adequate. In what follows I will present this evidence in the form of an example of how my account works in a context which may be more familiar than the debate over moral truthmakers—belief, disbelief, and non-acceptance of the proposition that God exists.

Consider the following table whose two dimensions are the categories of psychological attitudes at issue and two propositions they can take as their object:

¹⁶ Sometimes disbelief does not require justification. For example, if I disbelieve the claim that all birds are from Mars, it does not seem that I am required to immediately supply thorough justification for this disbelief. However, a disbelief of a claim that is not a *prima facie* falsehood does demand justification in the form of a reasoned rejection.

	Disbelieves	Does not Accept	Believes
MTMC	Minimalist+	Bare Minimalist	Truthmaker Theorist
“God exists”	Atheist	Agnostic	Theist

The body of the table is populated by the categories of persons who have each psychological attitude towards the proposition listed on the left-most column. I do not wish to defend the categories of persons in the bottom-most row as settled definitions of these terms which ought to be adopted in all matters, but only insofar as they can be used intuitively enough to aid in the clarification of my present point.

Suppose that the proposition “God exists” does not have *prima facie* status (i.e. we should neither think it is *prima facie* true nor *prima facie* false). In that case, the atheist who disbelieves the existence of God is on the hook for answering questions like “On what grounds do you believe that God does not exist?”. The atheist might reply with the argument from evil: reasoning from the fact that there is evil in the world to the non-existence of a God that is an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient being. Or perhaps the atheist prefers the argument that the existence of a supernatural God would run contrary to a naturalistic worldview and therefore could not be. On these grounds, the atheist believes that it rationally required that theism be disbelieved. The rationality of the atheist’s disbelief is dependent upon the soundness of whatever line of reasoning is its ground. However, demonstrating this rejection of theism to be unsound does not thereby prove that one ought to be a theist. The possibility left open is to simply not believe, or

have an attitude of non-acceptance towards, the proposition that God exists.

The agnostic does not believe that God exists, but this position is constituted by an attitude of non-acceptance; the agnostic has assessed the proposition and believes he is rational in not believing it. While true according to a literal rendering of terms, it gives the wrong impression to say that the agnostic also does not believe that God does not exist; it is more helpful to say that they accept no reasoning according to which any argument in favor of God's existence is necessarily unsound. If the theist thinks non-believers (a category in which I include both atheists and agnostics) ought to believe the proposition that God exists, then it is incumbent upon the theist to present evidence or reasoning in favor of the non-believers believing it (or such is the case according to my stipulation that the proposition is neither *prima facie* true or false). The atheist thinks, on the basis of their rejection of the proposition, that there is no nor could there be any such evidence or reasoning which demonstrates its truth.

If my analysis is correct, the agnostic does not carry the burden of justifying their stance of non-acceptance that God exists as a default position. However, it is plausible that the agnostic can justifiably retain their stance only by engaging with and assessing the reasoning offered by both the atheist and theist in favor of believing or disbelieving the proposition that God exists. That is, while the burden of justification is not present *ab initio*, the burden of response is relatively heavy.

If MTMC does not have *prima facie* status, the case outlined above should be formally identical to MTMC's. Under the stipulation that neither MTMC nor the proposition that God exists has *prima facie* status, if you believe that the agnostic stance is

a rationally permissible default position, you should also believe the bare minimalist stance is a rationally permissible default position. The Minimalist+ disbelieves MTMC and presents grounds for why its rejection is rationally required. The truthmaker theorist might show these grounds unconvincing or indecisive as arguments aimed at disproving MTMC, but in doing so they have not demonstrated the reason why a non-acceptance of MTMC is not a rationally permissible starting point. As it is for the theist, it is the burden of the truthmaker theorist to offer reasoning in favor of the non-believer believing the proposition which is the object of their positive doxastic attitude. Taking up bare minimalism as a default position does not require justification.

Of course, the success of this argument is dependent upon the truth of what has so far been merely stipulated: that MTMC does not have prima facie status. We must now assess whether we have sufficient reason to grant MTMC this status. Before proceeding, a warning of sorts is necessary: I do not believe the following argument has any bearing on the truth of MTMC, nor do I believe, in offering it, I will have presented reasons why anyone who already accepts MTMC should not accept it. If in what follows there is more of what resembles sociological data and discussion of what is intuitive or unintuitive than my reader thinks should be brought to bear on philosophical questions, I would ask them to keep in mind the modesty of my argumentative ambitions here. The question whose answer I seek is whether there is enough reason to suppose that MTMC is of the status “that which should be believed until we have been given reason not to believe it”, *not* whether MTMC should be believed.

First, consider MTMC's more general rendering, abstracted away from moral content:

General Truthmaker Conditional (GTMC): *“For any proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which ground(s) its truth.”*

If GTMC had prima facie status, then, plausibly, so too would MTMC by virtue of being a specific rendering of the more general principle. The position which involves the acceptance of GTMC, known as Truthmaker Maximalism, is contentious in the truthmaker theory literature. It is often thought that the biggest challenge it faces as a theory is its incredibility;¹⁷ it seems perfectly plausible to believe that mathematical, logical, or modal claims to be true for some other reason than the existence of mathematical, logical, or modal truthmakers. Reasoning that supports the plausibility of this belief is that, unlike empirical propositions, mathematical and logical propositions are true no matter what exists in the world or what states of affairs obtain. $2+2=4$ and $A \rightarrow A$ are just true no matter what is the case, or so it seems.¹⁸ It is plausible to suppose that, if GTMC is true, it would have to be justified by the best local truthmaker theories winning out over non-truthmaker alternatives in the mathematical, modal, and logical domains.

Debates over the existence of mathematical, logical, and modal truthmakers are contentious. Some minimalists argue that their rejection of moral truthmakers is justified because their metaethical minimalism has “companions in guilt” in other domains for which there are not obvious candidates for truthmakers. It may or may not be a successful strategy to invoke companions in guilt to justify a rejection of MTMC, but, again, my

¹⁷ See MacBride (2013) for a discussion of this point.

¹⁸ This line of reasoning can be found in Rodriguez-Pereya (2006)

ambitions are more modest than demonstrating the soundness of a rejection of MTMC. These companions in guilt lend credence to the claim that MTMC, if true, is not *obviously* true in virtue of the fact that it is derivable from a principle which has universal application across all other domains. That is, one reason to believe MTMC has prima facie status would be if there were no other candidates besides moral propositions for inclusion in the category “true propositions which do not require truthmakers”. If there were no such candidates, the metaethical minimalist would be out on a limb by herself, and you ought to be able to supply good reasons for going out on a limb by yourself. As evidenced by metaethical minimalism’s companions in guilt, this is not the case.

MTMC might be *prima facie* true if moral propositions were sufficiently similar or analogous to the kinds of propositions which do, *prima facie*, require the existence of truthmakers in order to be true. *Prima facie*, empirical judgments are of this category. As mentioned above, the existence of a red ball in the Oval Office seems to ground the truth of the empirical judgment “There is a red ball in the Oval Office”. In this case, the red ball in the Oval Office is the truthmaker of this judgment; if there existed no red ball or it existed somewhere other than the Oval Office, the judgment would be false. This principle this case relies on can be represented with the following conditional:

Empirical truthmaker conditional (ETMC): “*For any empirical proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which ground(s) its truth.*”

I do not mean to imply that everyone believes ETMC nor do I mean to consider its validity here. Its purpose in this discussion is to grant to the truthmaker theorist that among all the versions of the truthmaker conditional, ETMC has the greatest claim to the status of *that*

which should be believed until we have been given reason not to believe it. Are moral judgments sufficiently analogous to empirical judgments such that not believing both are grounded by truthmakers is a position that runs contrary to what is *prima facie* true? One reason to suspect that they may be is that we often make moral judgments about the same objects and states of affairs which are the subject-matter of empirical judgment; in this way, they have similar subject matter. However, some moral propositions, especially those occurring at a high level of abstraction, seem also to share qualities with non-empirical judgments, specifically logical and mathematical judgment; e.g. they can be deliberated over *a priori*, are often claimed to have universal application, and are sometimes taken to be absolute. Additionally, it is precisely those abstract moral propositions which seem to do the truth-determining work in the moral domain. That is, the truth of moral propositions about concrete states of affairs which resemble empirical propositions seems to *depend* on the truth of relatively abstract moral principles which do not resemble empirical propositions.

It would seem that moral propositions are in some ways analogous to empirical propositions and in other ways disanalogous. Or, only a certain class of moral propositions are analogous to empirical propositions, and it is not the class of moral propositions that appear to play a fundamental truth-determining role in the domain as a whole. . In light of this, it is difficult to see how one could justify the claim that moral judgments are sufficiently analogous to empirical judgments so as to show that MTMC has *prima facie* status in virtue of ETMC having *prima facie* status.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am not enough of an expert in the history of philosophy to be fully confident in the following point, but we may be able to appeal to authority to assess what ought to be granted the status of that which should be believed until given a reason to reject. If our philosophical authorities exhibited behavior which implied the

Evidence which might not initially be thought of as having value in metaethical debates, but is worth considering here, is the folk metaethical beliefs of the general population. Despite some realist interpretations of the data from the earliest studies on folk metaethics, Polzler (2017) finds that subjects do not show signs of having consistent beliefs about the status of moral propositions, suggesting that if there such a thing as folk metaethics, it does not seem to involve an endorsement of sweeping metaphysical principles like MTMC. What these data suggest in this context is that MTMC is not a pretheoretical starting point or default position to which philosophy must answer. Even if a philosophical theory or claim does contradict ordinary belief, this does not necessarily affect its final plausibility, but it does at the very least indicate that most people need convincing before believing it. The evidence cited above suggests that this is a dialectical burden which the minimalist, in not accepting MTMC, does not have.

Even if MTMC is not a piece of folk metaethical common sense, perhaps it has common sense status among those with enough philosophical training to properly understand its content. Were this so, then the minimalist would be under dialectical pressure to justify her non-acceptance of it in philosophical contexts. However, it is difficult to find a reason to believe that MTMC has *prima facie* status in this way. First, I can personally attest to the fact that not all philosophers find MTMC intuitively or

of the tendency throughout the history of philosophy (since Plato?) to treat the theoretical and the practical separately, this would suggest that there has been reason enough to suppose that answers about the former subject do not give us sufficient reason to think we have answered an analogous question about the latter. Simply put, inquiring into empirical and moral matters separately is not something which has been taken to require philosophical justification. This neither means that it is correct that no justification for this bifurcation can be given nor that it is correct that they be always treated separately. It is only meant to further establish that it is not taken as obvious among those with philosophical training that the moral and empirical are sufficiently similar so as to render the default non-acceptance of MTMC and acceptance of ETMC in need of justification.

obviously true. I do not expect this fact to move the needle in this debate, but I would ask the reader, even those who are committed to MTMC's truth, whether MTMC was their intuitive starting point or a result of some extra-intuitive philosophical theorizing. If it was the latter, then my argument that MTMC should not be granted *prima facie* status is aided. If it was the former, then the question becomes whether MTMC's intuitiveness is strong enough to the extent that a non-acceptance of it by other philosophers would have to be justified. It would be a cost to the plausibility of my argument if enough philosophers answer 'yes' to this question, but the minimalist has yet no reason to suspect this is the case.

In this section, I have attempted to show why MTMC, if it is true, is neither common sense nor should have *prima facie* status. As a consequence, the minimalist who does not accept MTMC does not need to justify their non-acceptance of it in virtue of flying in the face of common sense or denying a *prima facie* philosophical truth. Importantly, I have not argued that MTMC is a *prima facie* falsehood, meaning that the truthmaker theorist's acceptance of it does not come at a cost of plausibility the likes of some positions incur in virtue of flying in the face of common sense or being premised upon a *prima facie* falsehood. Solipsism and Panpsychism are possible members of this latter category.

At this point, one could scarcely blame the reader for not knowing what to make of bare minimalism or why it should be of interest. After all, the mere non-acceptance of MTMC appears not so much a philosophical stance as a state of doxastic inertia. Perhaps I have succeeded in showing that being in such a state is not irrational, but it is not clear how

bare minimalism nor the pointing out of its possibility contributes to metaethical inquiry. For those hostile to metaethics generally, perhaps identifying one's bare minimalism will be of value, as adopting it, unlike adopting Minimalism+, does not require wading into metaethical waters at all.

It is clear that those who take up bare minimalism as a default position can still contribute positively to metaethical inquiry. This is because not all metaethical debates are about the ontology of moral truthmakers. Debates over how or whether different normative concepts reduce to one another, the debate between motivational externalists and internalists, and issues of freedom and responsibility are all fair game for the bare minimalist. If there are philosophers who think these and other non-ontologically-infused debates are of interest can use the bare minimalist stance to bracket ontological issues which are orthogonal to these interests.

However, a question remains unanswered: is there any value of bare minimalism itself to metaethical inquiry? That is, can the bare minimalist contribute anything *vis a vis* their bare minimalism? I have avoided calling bare minimalism anything more than a "default position" in order to contrast it with a settled position in philosophy. Taking up the position of minimalism+ implies that there is something settled about one's thoughts about which one has this position. Bare minimalism, taken up as a *settled* position, does not have much content and appears only to imply a refusal to take part in debates over moral ontology. Taken as a *default* position, however, the bare minimalist has the potential to be recognized as a primary interlocutor in debates about the truth of MTMC which are not focused on the soundness of arguments aimed at rejecting it (Minimalism+).

Because the bare minimalist stance does not involve a rejection of MTMC, the bare minimalist has no reason to believe that believing MTMC is unjustifiable. And if MTMC does not have prima facie status, truthmaker theorists ought to have reasons which they can present to the bare minimalist which justify their believing it. Because so much of the metaethical literature is premised upon the truth of MTMC, there is ordinarily little motivation to make these reasons explicit. However, faced with the bare minimalist the truthmaker theorist is given an opportunity and motivation to present these reasons. The important difference between their dialectic with the bare minimalist and their dialectic with the Minimalist+ is that the truthmaker theorist will not be given the impression that they have demonstrated that believing MTMC is rationally required simply by virtue of refuting the arguments with which the Minimalist+ tries to reject it.

In sum, recognizing bare minimalism allows one to take up minimalism not as a settled position, but as a methodological starting point in debates about the truth of MTMC. A *methodological minimalist* is thus describable as a metaethicist who

- 1) does not accept MTMC,
- 2) does not reject MTMC, and
- 3) is a participant in dialectics about the truth of MTMC.

[~1), ~2), and 3)] is true of all truthmaker theorist's participating in dialects about the truth of MTMC with minimalists, and will be the methodological minimalist's chief interlocutor. [1), ~2), and 3)] is true of metaethicists who take up Minimalism+ as a settled position (Scanlon, Putnam, Blackburn, and perhaps Dworkin). [1), 2), and ~3)] is true of those who take up bare minimalism as a settled position in the way described above. If I am

correct that MTMC is not a prima facie truth, then the bare minimalist needs no argument taking [1), 2), and ~3)] as their default position. However, if presented with the reasons for the truthmaker theorist has for accepting MTMC, then as a responsible interlocutor, the *methodological* minimalist must contend with the following dilemma: either show why these are not compelling reasons for accepting MTMC or give up 1) as a result of this dialectic.

Though often tangled up with negative arguments against various brands of Minimalism+, some truthmaker theorists do present positive arguments for MTMC. The most compelling of these arguments are what I will call the respectability challenge from Donelson's (2018) and the norm proliferation challenge from Enoch's (2011), McPherson (2011) and Enoch and McPherson's (2017).

The respectability and proliferation challenges are attacks on the viability of minimalism from two opposing directions: On the one hand, the respectability challenge questions whether the minimalist can vindicate the truth of propositions for whom there are no truthmakers. On the other hand, the proliferation challenge argues that minimalism turns out to be too *permissive* with respect to the normative authority of discourses if the existence of truthmakers for constituent propositions is not a constraint on distinctly authoritative discourses. I turn my attention towards answering these challenges in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3: A Minimalist Response to the Respectability Challenge

In chapters 3 and 4, I will focus my attention on attacks on the viability of metaethical minimalism, or the metaethical position which is defined by the non-acceptance of a central presupposition of much of metaethical theorizing: “For any moral proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which make(s) it true.” The metaethical minimalist believes that they can consistently affirm that moral propositions are true while denying that there exist truthmakers which make them true. The minimalist’s hope is that their account can retain the intuitive objectivity of moral truth without taking on the ontological commitments of the moral realist.

This chapter will be dedicated to defending metaethical minimalism in the face of a challenge to it found in Donelson (2018): if the minimalist does not accept that there are moral truthmakers, then they cannot explain how and why domains of discourse²⁰ differ in respectability. “Respectability” is Donelson’s term of art designating a normative dimension along which domains of discourse can differ. As we will see later, respectable discourses are those which traffic in propositions which are 1) non-vacuously true and 2) ought to be taken seriously in practical deliberations. The minimalist cannot explain the respectability of moral discourse by way of reference to truthmakers, so the challenge is for

²⁰ With my “domains of discourse” I am following Scanlon’s use of the term “domain” in his (2014, p.23): “The term ‘domain’ as I am using it is just a way of referring to the fact that statements can make claims about different subjects: some make claims about the natural world, some make claims about numbers, some make claims about reasons. This is a common-sense idea”.

them to find some other way to non-arbitrarily differentiate moral discourse from those discourses which do not merit our respect.

Because the goal of this chapter is to provide a response to the respectability challenge on behalf of the minimalist, a necessary intermediate step will be to draw out precisely what is meant by “respectability”. This will be done more thoroughly in the following section, but one way of initially getting a grip on the concept is by considering examples of discourses which do *not* merit our respect. Examples include discourses trafficking in the claims of defunct scientific theory, astrological theory, discriminatory social codes, or descriptions of supernatural forces or entities. Though these discourses differ in terms of the degree of harm and the nature of the transgression (moral or epistemic) that is involved in their use, it is an intuitive notion that they are united by the fact that none of them should be taken seriously in the course of our epistemic or practical deliberations. The principles of alchemy ought not figure into our modeling the chemical interactions of oil and water, and Victorian-era rules of propriety ordinarily ought not matter in our deliberations over what to wear to a party. Using Donelson’s term, what unites these discourses is a lack of “respectability.” A plausible way of accounting for this lack of respectability is by pointing out that there exists no truthmakers for alchemical principles and Victorian standards of etiquette—consequently, the propositions which they license should not to be taken seriously.

Of course, not all metaethicists believe moral discourse *is* respectable—namely, error theorists and other moral nihilists. For these skeptics, identifying moral discourse as a fellow member of the group of unrespectables is not any real problem because there are no

non-vacuously true moral propositions in the first place. However, taking on a skeptical position does not make for a productive defense of minimalism due to the fact that error theory and moral skepticism is premised upon MTMC, and minimalism is defined by a lack of belief in MTMC. While the error theorist, like the minimalist, denies the existence of truthmakers of moral propositions, he arrives at this position by accepting (sometimes implicitly) MTMC, denying its consequent and inferring that no moral propositions are true. Consequently, the skeptic can explain respectability in exactly the way the respectability challenge demands; he can say that, like any discourse, moral discourse would only have been respectable if there were truthmakers for its constituent propositions. In other words, the moral realist and moral skeptic share in the belief that truthmakers explain respectability.

Because the minimalist does not accept MTMC, she does not believe that she must deny that moral propositions are true if she denies that there are truthmakers which ground their truth. However, the respectability challenge suggests that truthmakers do more than simply ground truths; their existence is also an indispensable part of a complete explanation of a distinctive feature of discourses which traffic in non-vacuous truths: respectability. If successful, the challenge shows that in denying the existence of truthmakers, minimalism is rendered explanatorily deficient. That is, it is not clear how the minimalist can maintain their non-acceptance of MTMC if they are committed, in addition to the truth of some moral propositions, to the respectability of moral discourse. Donelson thinks that in the face of the respectability challenge the minimalist must either 1) accept MTMC and deny that moral propositions can be true, 2) accept MTMC and

affirm the existence of moral truthmakers, or 3) deny that discourses can differ in respectability.

In what follows I carefully analyze what Donelson means by “respectable” and then present the respectability challenge in perspicuous form, highlighting the central role that knowability plays in Donelson’s understanding of the challenge. Next, I will show why the reasoning at the core of the respectability challenge is not decisive in favor of MTMC in virtue of the fact that one of its central premises is either undermotivated or begs the question against the minimalist. I then offer a clarifying account of the conceptual connection between the non-existence of truthmakers and unrespectability. I take this clarification to be of value because a misapprehension of this relationship could give rise to misplaced doubts about the possibility of respectability without truthmakers. Finally, I will make an unorthodox suggestion that will, if tenable, further dissolve concerns about minimalism’s lack of explanatory power *vis a vis* the knowability of moral propositions.

The Respectability Challenge in Full Form

Donelson says that respectable discourses “deserve some weight in relevant practical deliberations” (127). This is the intuitive core of the concept of respectability—some domains of discourse just shouldn’t be taken seriously. If this is true, it is entirely fair to ask what criteria must be met for a discourse to be taken seriously. Donelson characterizes respectable discourses as those whose constituent propositions “can be non-vacuously true” (127). In part, he seems to have in mind that the propositions of respectable discourses must be true not merely according to the arbitrary stipulation of

discourse-governing principles or axioms. So far, so good; if a proposition is true merely by stipulation, or true because it is licensed by a standard which is arbitrarily stipulated, it seems like it would be a mistake to weigh this proposition as heavily in our deliberations as more substantive truths.

Donelson's next step is to translate this condition into a metaphysical fact about respectability; he says that respectable discourses are those whose constituent propositions are not "totally unmoored from the world" (129). Of course, this characterization has literal purchase only if one thinks there must be a world which houses entities which "moor" all non-vacuously true propositions. A worry about this step is that in defining respectability in terms of a *way* in which non-vacuous truths are made true by the world is that Donelson is begging the question against the minimalist who does not accept MTMC. That is, while certainly true that a "mooring in the world" guarantees that a truth is not merely vacuous, the leap Donelson is in danger of making is supposing that this mooring is *necessary* for non-vacuous truths. The question-begging worry is magnified when attending to the way he chooses to cash out non-vacuous truth in the context of historical judgments: "If historical judgments can be [non-vacuously] true, some sets of events made the true ones true, and if that is so, we can come to know which are true by being in the right relationship with those events" (127-128). It is unclear whether Donelson means that historical judgments require this "right relationship" with events because they are about *history* or because this is how he is analyzing "non-vacuous" at the start.

Obviously, the respectability challenge would not get off the ground if the reasoning it offered against the minimalist's non-acceptance of MTMC relied on the premise that for all non-vacuously true propositions, truthmakers "made the true ones true". Happily, this is not the core of Donelson's argument. He also says that in cases of non-vacuous truth, "we come to know which are true", and this, I take it, is the heart of the matter for Donelson. Discourses merit our respect only if, for some set of their constituent propositions, their truth can, in principle, be substantiated. That is, for any respectable discourse, we can substantiate the truth of its constituent propositions in virtue of our ability to grasp *that because of which* they are true, where *that because of which* they are true cannot be a mere stipulation or choice. The position-defining belief of the truthmaker theorist is that this relationship of grasping between knower and *that because of which* some proposition is true is a relationship of access to truthmakers.

Here then is the reasoning behind the respectability challenge:

1. Discourses differ in respectability.
2. Discourses are respectable only if we can know the non-vacuous truth of some non-empty set of their constituent propositions. (The Principle of Knowability)
3. We can know the non-vacuous truth of the constituent propositions of a discourse only if we can access the truthmakers of some non-empty set of the constituent propositions of a discourse. (The Conditions of Knowability—Access Rendering)
4. If there exist no moral truthmakers, then we cannot access them.
5. If there exist no moral truthmakers, then we cannot know the non-vacuous truth of the constituent propositions of moral discourse. (From 3, 4)

6. If there exist no moral truthmakers, then moral discourse is not respectable. (From 2, 5)
7. Therefore, there exist moral truthmakers or moral discourse is not respectable. (From 6)

Quite clearly, the premise doing most of the substantive work in this line of reasoning is premise 3, which is a claim about the conditions of knowability. I will call this the “Access Rendering” of the conditions of knowability. Upon being presented with this challenge, and after identifying the key contentious premise, the state of the dialectic between the minimalist and the truthmaker theorist can be put thusly: the truthmaker theorist claims that even the minimalist must agree that there is a way in which we know moral propositions to be true (if any of them are true) and the way in which we know propositions to be true is by accessing their truthmakers. Therefore, the minimalist has reason to accept MTMC.

Premise 3

Insofar as the Access Rendering of the conditions of knowability is not a piece of common sense and its universality lacks *prima facie* status,²¹ it is fair to ask why we must accept its truth. If someone was already convinced of MTMC, then they should accept the Access Rendering in virtue of the fact that it straightforwardly follows from MTMC. That is, if you already accepted that truth-bearers are made true by truthmakers, it follows that the substantiation of the truth of a proposition requires in some way getting in touch with

²¹ By “*prima facie* status” I mean the status a proposition can have of being that which should be treated as true until given evidence of its falsity. I argue elsewhere why I believe MTMC should not be granted *prima facie* status and I believe my arguments there apply equally well to the Access Rendering. For the purposes of this paper, I will simply assume the Access Rendering does not have *prima facie* status.

their truthmakers. Obviously, taking MTMC to be the source of the Access Rendering's plausibility would mean the respectability challenge begs the question against the minimalist, so we ought to look for a more charitable reading of the situation on behalf of the truthmaker theorist.

If it were a semantic consequence that the Access Rendering is implied by the concept of knowing the non-vacuous truth of propositions, this would ground the Access Rendering's universality. That is, if there were no other way of coherently articulating under what conditions non-vacuous truths can come to be known, then the minimalist's simultaneously holding that moral propositions are known and knowing them doesn't involve access to truthmakers would be evidence of their being conceptually confused. Minimalism would thus be proven an incoherent position. Luckily for the minimalist, such a strong view is not plausible, as evidenced from how substantiation of truth and knowability has been discussed in this essay already. The minimalist can offer what I will call "the Neutral Rendering" of the conditions of knowability: "For any discourse, we can know that its constituent propositions are true only if we can apprehend *that because of which* they are true." The difference between the Access Rendering and the Neutral Rendering is that only the Access Rendering is ontologically-laden and implied by the truthmaker conditional. "Apprehension", as opposed to "access", is an epistemic relationship that can plausibly obtain between a target of inquiry presented in conception of the epistemic agent. We can *apprehend* meaning, a solution, a rule, a distinction, the significance of something, etc.. Though nothing in my defense relies on a complete analysis of these terms, I submit that the awkwardness of talking about "accessing" a rule, a

distinction, or significance, belies the difference in meaning between it and “apprehension”. To my ears, “accessing” implies a grasping of something which is presented as existing apart from the epistemic agent.

In the Neutral Rendering, “that because of which” is intended as a neutral stand-in for whatever grounds or that in virtue of which a proposition is true. Whatever “that” is in this locution, it requires more than an analysis of terms to justifiably hold that “that” necessarily refers to an existent truthmaker which is the target of an epistemic relation of access. The broader minimalist defense I offer will require making further reference to this Neutral Rendering of the conditions of knowability. Presently, I intend it as a counterexample to the claim that the Access Rendering is a semantic consequence of the conditions of knowability.

A more promising thought on behalf of the Access Rendering is that it *explains* knowability globally and that because knowability is central to explaining respectability, it is the only rendering of the conditions of knowability that is available to the minimalist wishing to answer the respectability challenge. That is, even if the Neutral Rendering is a possible articulation of the conditions of knowability, the Access Rendering offers an account of “apprehending *that because of which*”, that involves explaining “apprehending” in terms of “access” and “*that because of which*” in terms of truthmakers. We can find this move in Donelson’s line of reasoning: “We claim that particular judgments within the discourse have truthmakers; these objects we can investigate in order to come to know which judgments are true. This kind of epistemic upshot is not present for the minimalist. Neither knowability nor even hints about how moral judgments are known follow from

the fact of a moral truth, if there are no truthmakers” (128). The ability to claim that truthmakers can be searched for to figure out which propositions are true is a powerful resource that allows the truthmaker theorist to make sense of what is going on when we apprehend *that because of which* a constituent proposition of a respectable discourse is true. The idea is that if the minimalist cannot countenance truthmakers, they are denying themselves the resources to make sense of this central aspect of our epistemic lives.

Supposing that the Access Rendering’s raw explanatory power does not have immediate prima facie status, we should wonder why we should think it makes for a plausible explanans of the knowability of moral truths. The best way to understand the truthmaker theorist’s thought process here is to see them modeling epistemic access on observation of empirical states of affairs. The implicit line of reasoning seems to be this:

- I. Knowledge of empirical states of affairs involves the perception of those states of affairs or the observation of the best evidence we have for that state of affairs.
- II. Veridical observation and perception require standing in the right kind of relationship with the object of perception existing in physical space.
- III. Knowledge generally speaking is conditioned upon a relationship which is analogous to that relationship between observer and empirical states of affairs.
- IV. Therefore, abstracting away from empirical content and spatiality, this relationship of knowing can be understood as the relationship of access between the judge of the truth of a proposition and the truthmaker of that proposition.

Truthmaker theorists’ accounts may diverge on the details of the similarities and differences between our epistemic access to moral truthmakers and our epistemic access to

empirical truthmakers, but all these accounts are committed to access sharing a general form.

I have tried to make explicit the commitments operating in the background of the respectability challenge and draw out a plausible, non-question begging line of reasoning in their support. The flaw of the respectability challenge is that the Access Rendering, if it is to play the strong explanatory role required for the challenge to work, requires significant theoretical support and is not sufficiently argued for by Donelson. More importantly, no reason is offered as to why a non-ontological version of the conditions of knowability (the Neutral Rendering) is incapable of playing an explanatory role. To be sure, the Access Rendering presents a picture of substantiatibility that more closely resembles perception than does the Neutral Rendering. But to suppose that the Access Rendering has greater explanatory power in virtue of this greater similarity would be to beg the question against the minimalist; the very purpose of the respectability challenge is to demonstrate that, like empirical truth, moral truth requires truthmakers.

Moreover, we are not bereft of arguments in favor of the explanatory power of the Neutral Rendering and it is possible to think of examples which suggest that the Neutral Rendering has explanatory advantages over the Access Rendering. It is perfectly plausible that specific moral propositions are true in virtue of being determined by a general principle or rule. Evidence from ordinary language suggests that the Neutral Rendering is the more accurate description of the conditions under which someone comes to know why a specific proposition is true when determined by principle. E.g. I know that it is wrong to

lie because I apprehend (say) a principle of deontology and the power of this principle to determine the truth of “Lying is wrong”. It is simply more awkward to say that I “access” this principle and “access” its power as truthmaker of the proposition “Lying is wrong”. This example does not prove that the Access Rendering is *not* the proper account of the conditions of the knowability of moral propositions, only that its applicability is far from *obvious* and that argument is required to overcome what counterintuitive implications it has.

The minimalist can and should accept the knowability principle: that we must be able to substantiate some set of the constituent propositions of any discourse that merits our respect. Furthermore, the minimalist ought to accept that we should be able to articulate the conditions of knowability which grounds substantiability of moral propositions. However, even upon agreeing with the truthmaker theorist this much, the minimalist does not yet have good reason to accept that making sense of knowability requires anything more than a Neutral Rendering of the conditions of knowability: “For moral discourse, we can know that its constituent propositions are true only if we can apprehend that because of which they are true”.

The truthmaker theorist may think that the minimalist owes us an ontologically-laden explanation for how we apprehend that because of which moral propositions are true, but it is not clear how this is established by the respectability challenge without begging the question against the minimalist who does not accept MTMC. For his part, Donelson claims that the grounds of moral propositions are something “we can investigate in order to come to know which judgments are true” (128).

The minimalist can agree, insofar as apprehending that because of which moral propositions are true involves the procedures for justification and deliberation over what is made claim to in the proposition in question, and this procedure can be understood on analogy with a kind of investigation. If the truthmaker theorist has a literal investigation in mind, the kind which has ontological implications for the object of investigation, then the minimalist awaits a reason for why she ought to believe this kind of object exists as the target of moral justification and deliberation.

The minimalist need not commit to throwing out the Access Rendering entirely, only that it does not have as general an application as the truthmaker theorist suggests for it—i.e. the problem with premise 3 lies in its “only if” construction. The minimalist can and should accept the *weaker* Access Rendering:

“If we can access the truthmakers of some set of the constituent propositions of a discourse, then we can know the non-vacuous truth of the constituent propositions of that discourse ”

I will discuss this weaker rendering and its implications in the section which follows.

If the Neutral Rendering of the conditions of knowability is substituted in for premise 3 of the respectability challenge, then all the respectability challenge shows is the following:

Minimalist Conclusion to the Respectability Challenge (MC): “if there is no member of the category ‘that because of which moral propositions are true’, then moral discourse is not respectable.

For the minimalist, this conclusion is at its most substantive an epistemic or practical principle and at its least a trivial truth, but in neither case does the minimalist need to accept it has ontological implications. That is, in a move which should be unsurprising to those familiar with minimalist strategies, the minimalist can hold that the truthmaker theorist's central ontological or metaphysical premise (the Access Rendering) is a spruced-up version of a normative claim about how we ought to reason or act. Using reason-talk as a substitute for "that because of which",²² MC amounts to the claim that if there are no reasons that moral propositions are true, then moral discourse does not merit our respect.

In sum, the argumentative force of the respectability challenge hangs on a premise (The Access Rendering) which is unargued for or baldly begs the question against the minimalist. Moreover, we have seen that there is another possible articulation of the conditions of knowability which could figure into a perfectly acceptable version of the reasoning at the heart of the respectability challenge, one with no ontological implications for *that because of which* moral propositions are true. The minimalist has been given no decisive reason to opt for an ontological version of the conditions of knowability (premise 3) and therefore, in the face of the respectability challenge, has been given no decisive reason to accept MTMC.

²² This rendering of the minimalist conclusion of the respectability challenge is meant to be an aid for comprehension, I do not wish to imply that I accept any flavor of reasons-fundamentalism nor do I wish to imply that the success of my argument depends on reasons-fundamentalism. For more on reasons-fundamentalism, see e.g. Scanlon (2014).

An Analysis of the Relationship Between Unrespectability and the Non-existence of Truthmakers

The above has been my argument that the respectability challenge does not succeed in offering the minimalist a reason to stop disbelieving MTMC. In what follows I will present an analysis of why it is natural for the truthmaker theorist to think that there is a logical connection between unrespectability and the non-existence of truthmakers. I will offer a way in which both the minimalist and the truthmaker theorist can accept that the logical connection holds without this connection bearing on their debate over the acceptability of MTMC. This is offered as a therapeutic recognition of a common ground between the two camps and as an inoculation against the temptation to read more into the relationship between truthmaking and respectability than is warranted.

The logical connection can be best understood by first attending to the following conditional, which both minimalists and truthmaker theorists should accept:

A: “If a proposition is unknowable, then either there exist no truthmakers which ground its truth or they exist and we cannot access them.”

This is trivially true, for its negation would imply the incoherent claim that there could be propositions we could not know to be true in spite of their being true and our being able to access their truthmakers (i.e. apprehend that because of which they are true).²³ We can connect this claim up with the previous discussion of the minimalist’s acceptance of the

²³ Gettier cases may show that the fact that a proposition is true and our apprehending its justification may not be sufficient for having knowledge. The claim I am operating with here is weaker: namely, that the fact that a proposition is true and that we are able to apprehend that because of which it is true is sufficient for the *knowability* of said proposition.

Weaker Access Rendering; according to it, access to truthmakers is sufficient for respectability, thus implying the conditional,

B: “If there exist truthmakers for a given discourse’s constituent propositions and we can access them, then that discourse is respectable.”

Returning now to the point of this section; there is a logical connection between the non-existence of truthmakers and unrespectability, but it is a sufficiency relation that is implied by conditionals A and B. That is, a discourse’s unrespectability is sufficient for the non-existence of truthmakers serving as grounds of its constituent proposition or our lack of ability to access them. This is the contrapositive of conditional B;

C: “For any discourse, if it is unrespectable, then there exist no truthmakers which ground the truth of its constituent propositions or they exist and we cannot access them.”

The minimalist should have no qualms accepting all of A, B, and C despite the fact that they involve general claims about unrespectability and the non-existence of truthmakers. As you’ll recall, the Weaker Access Rendering of the conditions of knowability (“If we can access the truthmakers of some set of the constituent propositions of a discourse, then we can know the non-vacuous truth of the constituent propositions of a discourse”) is a specific version the more neutral rendering such that if a discourse does not meet the conditions of the Neutral Rendering then necessarily it does not meet the conditions of the Weaker Access Rendering. A, B, and C are just specific versions of a more general claim working in the background: that insofar as a proposition is

unknowable or a discourse unrespectable, then no possible rendering of the knowability conditional is true of it.

The point of this analysis is to show that it is natural to think there is a logical connection between the non-existence of truthmakers and unrespectability because A, B, and C are all true. Moreover, grasping this logical connection is of positive value and helps us explicate some discourses' unrespectability. Consider the following explicantia regarding discourse surrounding the existence of witches:

W1: Discourse about witches has been demonstrated unrespectable, and as a consequence, we should not believe that there exist any truthmakers for positive claims made about witches.

W2: If there had existed truthmakers for propositions about witches and we could access them, then witch discourse would have been respectable.

Both **W1** and **W2** are true and are of potential clarificatory aid, but we must be careful not to think that they imply the truth of the stronger claim, "For any discourse, it is respectable only if there exist truthmakers grounding its constituent propositions." This conditional is a version of the generalized version of the truthmaker conditional (GTMC), and presupposing its truth would beg the question against the minimalist's non-acceptance of MTMC. I do not wish to argue that Donelson was making this mistake, only that it might be a tempting line of thought to think that GTMC followed deductively from the logical connection between the existence of truthmakers, our access to them, and respectability. Though however tempting and natural it may be, we must prevent

ourselves from falling for it on pain of the irrationality of accepting an invalid piece of reasoning.

An Unorthodox Suggestion to Further Dissolve the Respectability Challenge

I will conclude this essay by gesturing at an unorthodox suggestion aimed at dissolving what may be the remaining reasoning in support of MTMC to be found in the respectability challenge. This remaining support for MTMC is argued for as follows:

More than knowability, that we have a *capacity* to know calls out for explanation, and the minimalist has offered nothing in the way of such an explanation. It is no explanation at all to describe this as the capacity of being able to apprehend that because of which moral propositions are true. Surely there is more that can and must be said to aid in our understanding of this ability. If there isn't, then we should be as skeptical of this "capacity" as much as we are skeptical of any explanation offered by psychics of their capacity to see the future or any explanation offered by mind-readers of their capacity to tell us what others are thinking. Their claims are not respectable in part because *there is no good explanation* of how they are apprehending the grounds of these claims beyond the same vague notion of "apprehension" used in the Neutral Rendering. By her own admission, the minimalist interprets the Neutral Rendering of the conditions of knowability as a normative/epistemic claim about what is required for the justification of a proposition's truth, not as an explanatory claim aimed at making sense of the mystery of our capacity for moral knowledge. Therefore, the real dilemma the minimalist faces is the following:

The minimalist's explanatory dilemma (MED): "Either the capacity for apprehending that because of which moral propositions are true is utterly mysterious or there is some further explanation for how we gain moral knowledge."

The truthmaker theorist's reasoning continues: grasping the first horn of the dilemma renders philosophy impotent in the face of a central question of epistemology and justifies skepticism about the respectability of moral discourse. This gives us reason to grasp the second horn, and doing so means that we should attempt to construct a model for how we substantiate moral facts. Until we can demonstrate where the disanalogies lie, we should construct this model on analogy with the best account of substantiability we presently have: our epistemic access to empirical states of affairs, i.e. perception. Veridical perception, i.e. the kind that explains our capacity for empirical knowledge, involves a perceiver being in the right kind of relation with the object of perception. Therefore, we have reason to accept a model of epistemic access to moral facts that involves an authoritative moral judge being in the right kind of relation (i.e. gaining *access* to) an analog of the object of empirical perception (i.e. the moral truthmaker). Reasons to accept this model are simultaneously reasons to accept the truth of MTMC. Therefore, the minimalist has reason to accept MTMC if they do not want to render our capacity for knowledge utterly mysterious and license moral skepticism.

It might be suspected that my suggestion is that the minimalist grasp the first horn of MED, as this would be consistent with a kind of quietism that is a close cousin of some

minimalisms.²⁴ However, I will not recommend endorsing quietism, as I am optimistic about the ability of philosophy to answer or aid in the answering of explanatory questions. Rather, I wish to make the following unorthodox suggestion: the capacity for a person to know moral propositions does not demand explanation. (The positive component of this suggestion, which I can only parenthetically mention here, is that having the capacity to know is a normative status that is tied up with the broader normative category of being a person, not part of a physical or metaphysical *description* of an individual). Instead, it is the failure of this capacity and unknowability that demands explanation and is of relevance to unrespectability. Consequently, respectability is not better understood via a metaphysical account of our capacity for knowledge. Rather, respectability is understood by contrast with *unrespectability*, and unrespectability is conceptually tied up with the *failure* to know. If this suggestion is correct, then the real mistake of the respectability challenge is supposing that anything like the Access Rendering of the conditions of the knowability was required to secure the vindication of any discourse whose respectability was not already on the line. Consequently, answers about the metaphysical nature of our capacity for knowledge are not relevant to the task of explaining respectability. I will demonstrate what I mean by returning to the example of the claims made by psychics and mind-readers.

I contend that the claims of psychics and mind-readers are not shown to be unrespectable because we are found bereft of explanations for their alleged capacities and therefore conclude that their claims do not satisfy the knowability principle. Were this how it worked, this would amount to a failure to explain knowability, given that according

²⁴ E.g. Dworkin (1998), Parfit (2011), and perhaps Scanlon (2014)

to our best explanatory practices, the Access Rendering of the conditions of knowability is *the* explanans of knowability. Rather, and this I suggest is the case with every discourse (even the kinds that generally merit our respect), evidence of unrespectability and unknowability is antecedent to our apprehension of conditions of knowability and our understanding of our capacity for knowledge. Evidence that the discourse trafficked in by psychics and mind-readers is *systematically* and *completely* unrespectable is evidence that it fails to satisfy the knowability principle because, by definition, the constituent propositions of an unrespectable discourse are not knowable. Consequently, this is also evidence that there exists no truthmakers for any of its constituent propositions because it follows logically that if the constituent propositions of an entire discourse is unknowable, then it must be the case either that there exist no truthmakers for them or they exist but we cannot access them.

If an unsuccessful search for truthmakers does not determine the unrespectability of the claims of psychics and mind-readers, then there must be some other means of determining their unrespectability. What is this mark of unrespectability? My answer is that we find discourses are unrespectable because they fail their users and cause their users to fail. In the case of psychic and mind-reading discourses, those who traffic in them have more false beliefs and make more mistaken predictions within other discourses than those who do not. That is, neither psychic discourse, mind-reading discourse nor their use merits our respect because they are used to the epistemic detriment of its users.²⁵ When we conclude that neither a discourse nor its use merits our respect, we find by logical

²⁵ With “users of a discourse” I refer both those who sincerely make its claims and those who believe its claims.

consequence that it fails to satisfy the knowability principle. Because it fails to satisfy the knowability principle, there are no conditions under which its constituent propositions can be known. So goes my suggestion.

Importantly, being “caused to fail” by a discourse is not a state which can only be judged to obtain from the domain-internal standards of another discourse that is in conflict with the failure-inducing discourse. That is, while forming beliefs about supernatural entities may cause someone to disbelieve scientific claims, supernatural discourse is not thereby unrespectable only according to the no-more-authoritative domain-internal standards of scientific discourse. Requiring that all normative judgments be made according to domain-internal standards is a tenant of T.M. Scanlon’s form of minimalism—a consequence of this feature of his position is that there is no way to secure a minimalist explanation of respectability that performs just as intuitively as the truthmaker theorists’. Wodak (2016) makes the point succinctly about deciding between respectability of discourse about witches and scientific discourse:

“Scanlon never gives us an asymmetric condition to serve as a tie-breaker. Indeed, it’s not clear how he could. He may say that scientific discourse has ‘demonstrated success’ in ‘predicting and explaining what seem to be obvious facts about this world’ (20), and witch discourse has not. But how are quietists entitled to make such comparisons? What domains are such comparisons internal to? If they are internal to the scientific domain, they add nothing: we already knew that scientific claims meet scientific standards but supernatural claims don’t, and vice versa. So

this is still a symmetric condition, and cannot serve as an explanation for why quietists are justified in privileging science” (p.12).

The solution is that there must, for the minimalist, be a notion of mistake which is domain-transcendent. That is, some discourses cause its users to make mistakes that are more significant than a violation of the domain-internal standards of another discourse. It is true that a belief in the supernatural power of witches causes the believer to disbelieve scientific truths, but this constitutes a failure of witch-discourse not because it runs up against the standards of another discourse, but because it contradicts the domain-transcendent truths that scientific discourse trafficks in. Disbelief in a domain-transcendent truth is one way of making a domain-transcendent mistake. Great progress is to be made by minimalism by abandoning Scanlon’s austere domain-internality; I demonstrate this strategy further in the following chapter.

If my above suggestion is correct, then the respectability challenge mistakenly reverses the order of these steps. I.e. it mistakenly takes respectability to be secured by the satisfaction of the knowability principle and this knowability to be secured by explaining how the conditions of knowability obtain for whatever is the object of inquiry. Understanding how these conditions obtain then requires positing a plausible model of our capacity for knowledge. Because the Access Rendering of the conditions of knowability has explanatory power in the empirical domain, the thought is that the respectability of moral discourse can be secured through positing an instance of the capacity for moral knowledge that is implied by the Access Rendering. According to my suggestion, however, the respectability of moral discourse is only ever in question if we

have antecedent evidence of its unrespectability. That is, if we have evidence that moral discourse failed its users or its users failed in some way because they traffic in moral discourse.²⁶ This failure may plausibly amount to having more false beliefs and imply being disposed in some way analogous to being disposed to making mistaken predictions. The positive claim that the minimalist then must commit to then to fend off concerns about the respectability of moral discourse is a relatively humble one: that such a failure is not exhibited by users of moral discourse on account of their use of it.

²⁶ We can see how this tracks the principle of knowability upon respectable discourses if we bear in mind the Neutral Rendering of the conditions of knowability (“For any discourse, we can only know that its constituent propositions are true if we can apprehend that because of which they are true”). Implied by my suggestion is that if we have reason to believe that no user of a discourse could apprehend that because of which the constituent propositions of this discourse are true, then we also have reason to believe that said discourse fails this user or that user fails because they traffic in said discourse.

Chapter 4: A Minimalist Response to the Proliferation

Challenge

Introduction

According to the truthmaker theorist, metaethical minimalism lacks the resources to vindicate or explain our practice of moral deliberation and claim-making. With the respectability challenge, the truthmaker theorist argued that the minimalist could not account for the moral domain's respectability if 1) there are no moral truthmakers and 2) we accept that it is a feature of all unrespectable discourses that they lack truthmakers for their constituent propositions. The respectability challenge placed pressure on the minimalist to offer an alternative condition of respectability which allowed for articulating the contrast between the moral domain and domains which do not merit our respect. In this chapter, I focus on another challenge put to minimalism by truthmaker theorists—what I call “the proliferation challenge”—and offer a way for the minimalist to resist its conclusions. This time, the challenge for the minimalist is to explain the special, authoritative status moral norms have in our practical deliberations. According to the truthmaker theorist, this special status is explained by the fact that the moral standard (according to which moral norms are true) “tracks normative reality.” The proliferation challenge does not posit truthmakers to explain the truth of particular moral claims like “Torturing others for fun is wrong”. Instead, it focuses on the truth of a second-order

claim *about* what is morally correct; namely, that these moral claims have distinctive authority in our practical deliberations.

Though importantly different, the respectability challenge and the proliferation challenge are motivated by similar concerns over minimalism's ability to vindicate moral discourse. The former demanded that the minimalist make sense of the fact that moral discourse deserves *any* consideration in our deliberations whatsoever and the latter demands the minimalist makes sense of the *distinctive* consideration it deserves. Because of this difference, the solution I offered to resist the respectability challenge will not suffice as an answer to the proliferation challenge. Though a necessary condition for any distinctively authoritative discourse, it is not sufficient to attribute moral discourse's authority to the fact that it does not fail nor causes its users to fail. As will be explored in more detail below, this is most clearly seen when considering numerous examples of domains discourses which meet this condition and yet fail to have distinctive authority.

According to the proliferation challenge, the minimalist must either deny that moral norms have distinctive authority or they must accept the existence of a normative reality (i.e. truthmakers) which makes it true that moral norms are distinctly authoritative (thus giving up their minimalism). The proliferation challenge gets its name for the following reason: if the minimalist grasps the first horn of this dilemma, then there are no constraints on the proliferation of competing normative systems to our own which are intuitively implausible. Truthmaker theorists illustrate this point by asking us to imagine an anti-moral or "schmoral" domain of discourse that is 1) equal to the moral domain in coherence and scope, and 2) features in the practical reasoning of an imaginary community

in a formally identical way to the way moral norms feature in our own practical reasoning.

²⁷ According to the schmoral standard, for example, the fact that an action will cause pain stands in favor of performing that action. If neither the schmoral or moral domains' constituent propositions are rendered authoritative by their standard's tracking a normative reality, on no grounds can the minimalist explain the truth of the following: "despite this formal symmetry, it is incorrect to weigh schmoral reasons as heavily as moral reasons, even for schmoral reasoners"? Of course, this conclusion is premised upon the notion that, in their non-acceptance of the existence of truthmakers, the minimalist denies themselves any other way to account for the fact that moral norms have a distinctive authority in our deliberations. Resisting this supposition will be the guiding thrust of my defense.

It might be thought that this challenge can be dissolved straight away by simply pointing out that moral propositions about reasons for actions are true and schmoral propositions, insofar as they contradict these true moral propositions, must be false. Therefore, moral propositions constituting reasons for action have greater authority than schmoral propositions in virtue of their truth. The minimalist, by definition, accepts a deflationary/minimalist account of 'truth', so this solution would not force the minimalist into accepting the existence of moral truthmakers. According to this solution, the proliferation challenge presents no distinctive worry about the tenability of metaethical minimalism.

²⁷ See Enoch (2011), McPherson (2011), Enoch and McPherson (2016), Wodak (2016), Donelson (2018) for this version of the challenge.

The problem with this reply is that, according to the standard internal to the schmoral domain, schmoral propositions are true and moral propositions, insofar as they contradict schmoral propositions, are false. Much in the way that chess players accept the rules of chess as their standard for correct chess moves, the community of schmoral reasoners accepts the schmoral standard and deliberates on what to do according to it. The minimalist wants to claim along with the moral realist that moral propositions are true and schmoral propositions are false, but if both are constituents of equally coherent domains of discourse what difference between them grounds the fact that we ought to opt for one over the other? Can't an exactly symmetrical claim be made by the schmoral reasoner that moral propositions are false according to the schmoral standard? The truthmaker theorist claims that any metaethical account wanting to vindicate our ordinary deliberative practices must explain this difference between the moral and schmoral domain, i.e. the difference between a standard that is "robustly" normative and a standard that is merely "formally" normative. For the truthmaker theorist, the difference between the two is precisely that, while there exists a normative reality undergirding the moral standard, no such undergirding obtains for the schmoral standard.

The Proliferation Challenge

Rendered more precisely, the reasoning of the proliferation challenge runs as follows:

1. There are different standards of correctness according to which something counts in favor of performing an action.

2. What counts in favor of performing an action according to robustly normative standards for action has distinctive authority in our deliberations in comparison to what counts in favor of performing an action according to merely formally normative standards of correctness (McPherson 2011, MS 9-10).²⁸
3. What counts as a reason for action according to the moral standard has distinctive authority in our practical deliberation.
4. That something counts in favor of an action according to the schmoral standard does not have distinctive authority in practical deliberation.
5. The difference in authority between what counts as a reason for action according to robustly normative standards (like the moral standard) and what counts in favor of an action according to merely formal standards (like the schmoral standard) calls out for explanation.
6. We can explain this difference in authority between the schmoral and moral standard only if we commit to the claim that moral reasoners, in holding moral reasons in special regard, “track the normative structure of reality” (19 E&M). I.e. Only if we posit truthmakers which ground the truth of claims about the distinctive authority of reasons for action according to robustly normative standards.
7. We have reason to believe that for any moral proposition, if it is true, then there exist(s) some truthmaker(s) which ground(s) its truth. (MTMC)

²⁸ “Having distinctly authoritative” is not meant to be a sociological or physical description of how norms are treated or thought of in our practical deliberations. In this context, to say of a norm that it is distinctly authoritative is to offer a normative assessment of it, implying that these norms ought to weigh more heavily in our practical deliberations than norms which do not have distinctive authority.

The proliferation challenge is typically directed at the version of minimalism defended by TM Scanlon, though it has been suggested that it presents a problem for all forms of metaethical minimalism.²⁹ I will argue that metaethical minimalism can resist the proliferation challenge by abandoning two core theses of Scanlon's particular version of minimalism. This first is the thesis that because the truth of a proposition is always settled by standards internal to the domain of which it is a member, there are no privileged domains of discourse. Following Wodak (2016), I will call this Scanlon's Autonomy Thesis.³⁰ The second is the thesis that there is no "general idea of existence", implying that "genuine ontological questions are all domain-specific" (Scanlon 2011, n.10). I will call this Scanlon's Existence Thesis.

The Autonomy thesis contains at least two components. First, it suggests that the truth of propositions which have a certain subject-matter is determined by the standard of correctness internal to the domain of discourse of that subject-matter. Normally this would not sound like a controversial claim—after all, the question of whether "torturing someone for fun" is true seems rightly settled by moral principles. However, more controversial claims follow when marrying this aspect of Scanlon's Autonomy thesis with his Existence thesis. Scanlon thinks we should understand seemingly domain-external existence-claims like "moral facts exist" as claims whose truth is established by reasoning "internal to the moral domain" (29), not as claims whose truth is established by our broader metaphysical/explanatory commitments. For Scanlon, there is no sense of

²⁹ See Donelson (2018, p. 129)

³⁰ As Wodak points out (2016, p. 2797, n.4), this label is something of a misnomer but is based on Scanlon's use of the term in describing his position (e.g, Scanlon 2011, 21-23).

“existence” that cuts across all domains. Of the empirical domain, Scanlon says the following:

“Claims about the existence of objects in the spatio-temporal world do seem to involve a ‘thick’ or ‘robust’ idea of existence. But the ‘thickness’ of these existential claims is provided by the idea of that world itself. For physical objects to exist is for them to have spatio-temporal location, to have various physical properties, and to interact causally with other objects. The relevant idea of “thickness” is thus domain-specific” (28).

Building upon the idea that each domain has its own internal standard of correctness, the second component of his Autonomy thesis is the commitment that no sensible domain-external claim can be made about which domain(s) ought to be privileged over any others.

Scanlon’s motivation for advancing this position is primarily to demonstrate how one can claim to be a non-skeptical and non-naturalist moral cognitivist without taking on unsavory metaphysical baggage. Coupling his Existence Thesis and his Autonomy Thesis allows Scanlon to reject that there is anything metaphysically or ontologically mysterious about claims about the existence of numbers or facts about norms. That is, the naturalist’s worry over how we could live in a universe in which both physical objects and abstract entities existed is ill-founded; each does exist but only according to the sense of “existence” operative in their respective domains. Privileging physical existence over numerical existence not only requires an instance of a domain-hopping equivocation of “existence”,

it is entirely undermotivated because numerical existence is not “thick” enough to give rise to any metaphysical mystery in the first place (28).

Back to the proliferation challenge. Challengers to his view point out that Scanlon must reject the conclusion that there is some form of existence undergirding the distinctive authority of moral reasons. This is because according to the standard internal to the schmoral domain, an analogous ground for schmoral reasons exists, and according to Autonomy, no domain’s existence claims should be privileged over any other. Additionally, Scanlon’s Existence Thesis forecloses on the possibility of his appealing to a domain-transcendent idea of the existence of moral truthmakers in order to explain morality’s distinctive authority. This forces Scanlon into grasping the first horn of the dilemma as described above: that moral norms do not have distinctive authority. It seems Scanlon is willing to bite this bullet; he says,

“According to my view, as long as this way of talking was well defined [and] internally coherent, ... we would be committed to the existence of things quantified over in the existential statements counted as true in this way of talking” (27).³¹

However, this admission comes at a great cost; there seems to be no limit on the number of standards imparting the same authority on the norms they license. Even if according to the standards governing the moral domain the claim “There are no schmoral reasons” is correct, no mistake is being made by the schmoral reasoner making if he accepts the truth

³¹ See *ibid* (27 - 30) for Scanlon’s full discussion of why he thinks it is unproblematic for him to bite-the-bullet on the existence of what I am calling “schmeasons”.

of the converse claim about moral reasons, licensed by the domain-internal schmoral standard.

Scanlon does say that the fact that a particular domain's claim conflicts with another domain's "provides decisive reason to reject" the existential commitments of the conflicting domain (21). However, the relation of conflict is symmetrical—while Scanlon's view accounts for the intuitive fact that we can at most opt for one of the two domains, it does not account for the fact that opting for schmorality would be the wrong choice. We want to say that it is simply untrue, irrespective of what the schmoral standard says despite what the schmoralist may coherently think, that it is a good reason to perform an action just in case that action causes pain. It is reasonable to believe that if this is what minimalism is committed to, the line of reasoning from minimalism to this conclusion demonstrates minimalism's falsehood by *reductio*.

Transitional Clarification

Before I offer my proposal for how the minimalist should answer the proliferation challenge, it will be important to clarify precisely what is and is not demanded of the minimalist in this dialectic. The truthmaker theorist is *not* challenging the minimalist to explain normativity nor does he claim that truthmakers are required for anything whatsoever to be a reason for acting in some way. That is, the minimalist is not on the hook for explaining the nature of a norm's standing in favor of an action in our practical deliberations—only the special kind of authority of a certain class of norms. The reliance on truthmakers to explain why "robust" normativity differs from merely "formal"

normativity implies that the normativity of the latter may obtain without being grounded in a distinctly normative reality. That is, the truthmaker theorist accepts that there are rules governing chess are formally normative, but he does not charge the minimalist with the inability to explain that in virtue of which these rules are normative. McPherson, the apparent genitor of the proliferation challenge, claims that schmoral reasons are like chess rules in that they both have merely formal normativity (2011, 10). If normative reality were required to explain the normativity of chess rules and schmoral reasons, then the truthmaker theorist would need some other way to draw the distinction between these formally normative standards and the robustly normative standards besides the latter's tracking normative reality. Consequently, each party in this dialectic agrees that schmoral reasons and chess rules are normative (to limited formal extent that they are) in virtue of some other fact(s) besides their tracking normative reality.

Whatever it is that explains normativity in general, the minimalist appears to be in no worse off explanatory position than the truthmaker theorist, at least according to the present concern being raised. What the proliferation challenge claims about minimalism is that it is in a worse off explanatory position with respect to the *distinctive authority* of standards which are robustly normative. Answering the challenge for the minimalist requires their explaining why certain norms have this particular feature, not to explain the property of being a norm itself.

The Minimalist's Negative Solution

Luckily for the minimalist, Scanlon's strategy of biting the bullet is not the only way of answering the proliferation challenge. I will recommend that the minimalist do away with both Scanlon's Autonomy Thesis and Existence Thesis and reintroduce the privileging of certain domains on the basis of the domain-transcendent truth of their governing standards. First, however, the conditions of a successful minimalist solution should be articulated. McPherson helpfully lays these criteria out explicitly in his (2011), and I will happily take them on. In order for the minimalist to successfully account for the difference between robust and merely formal normativity, the following must be satisfied:

- 1) "The correct normative standard would need to have a feature (call it F) that explain[s] the robust normativity of that standard."
- 2) "F must be non-detachable from each substantive norm within the correct normative standard. For if it were not, there could be a normative standard that was inconsistent with the correct normative standard, but that was nonetheless just as robustly normative, in virtue of having F. This would in turn entail that there would be no non-arbitrary grounds for choice between the correct normative standard and this alternative."
- 3) "F must not simply reflect the metaphysical nature of normativity, for to do so would be to abandon the [minimalist] program." (all from 2011, p.11)

The minimalist can maintain the difference between morality and schmorality along these lines outlined by McPherson and can do so without explaining away the distinctive (robust) normativity of morality. McPherson doubts that any feature that satisfies F in the above 3 criteria can be found, but I believe this is because he is conceiving

of F *positively*, i.e. as F being some state or feature of the correct normative standard that is *constitutive* of its being. Instead, the minimalist can conceive of F as a *negative* criterion, i.e. as some property which the correct normative standard *cannot* possess and in its not possessing it counts as robustly normative.

Here is my suggestion in two parts: i) norms which are merely formally normative stand in favor of performing an action and do so because they are only licensed by a standard which depends on choice, adoption, or stipulation, either collectively or individually; ii) Norms which are robustly normative stand in favor of performing an action and do so *not* because they are licensed by a standard which depends on choice, adoption, or stipulation, either collectively or individually.

Put simply, feature F is “depending on choice, adoption, or stipulation, either collectively or individually”. As I will explore in more detail later, this feature satisfies McPherson’s first condition because being true due to stipulation or convention is simply the necessary and sufficient condition of a norm’s being merely formally normative and not fully, robustly normative. Insofar as it is normative at all, a norm is either robustly normative or merely formally normative. A norm’s non-possession of the property which is necessary and sufficient for its being merely formal explains that norm’s robust normativity. In this way, robust normativity is similar to the property of being a *mind-independent* truth as opposed to a mind-dependent truth. Suppose one were interested in explaining the mind-independence of a mind-independent fact by way of possession of some feature F*. F* is simply the negative property of a proposition: namely, that its truth does not depend upon any facts about minds or mental states. Analogously, F

is the property of a norm: that its standing in favor of an action is not because it is licensed by a standard whose content is owed to choice, adoption, or stipulation, either collectively or individually. Because McPherson uses the term “robust”, the property of being robustly normative sounds like a property that is, well, robust. But this is just a quirk of his chosen terminology. Supposing that *robust* normativity cannot be explained by a negative feature because such a feature is not *robust* would be to beg the question against the minimalist.

On my suggestion McPherson’s second condition is also satisfied because each norm which is licensed by the robustly normative standard also does not owe their truth to having been licensed by a domain-internal standard whose truth is owed to choice, adoption, or stipulation, either collectively or individually. Furthermore, insofar as this feature is the lack of something, it certainly does not “reflect the metaphysical nature of normativity”, so McPherson’s third condition is straightforwardly satisfied. However, a natural question arises about my account that might be thought to hint at something metaphysical. The moral standard, insofar as it is robustly normative, does not owe its correctness to stipulation, convention, adoption, or choice—to what, then, *does* the moral standard owe its correctness? I will address this question below, but first I will discuss why I think formal normativity is adequately explained in light of my suggestion.

‘Merely’ Formal Normativity Explained

I do not have in mind a formal analysis that lays bare what is shared between that which is conventional and what is stipulated that allows them to disjunctively explain merely formal normativity, but I will offer examples of each that are meant to render this

shared explanatory role intuitive. At my parents' house, it is understood that the person who leaves the dinner table first ought to clear the rest of the dinner party's dishes as well. This is a convention to which my family has become accustomed, and according to the standard governing the "Franklin Family Dinners"-domain, it is correct that the clearing of the dishes be done this way. I.e. "The first person who leaves the table should clear the rest of the dishes" is a norm that is true only because it is licensed by a conventionally true standard governing this particular context. Of course, the Franklin-Family Dinner standard need not have arisen by convention, imagine instead that it was agreed to beforehand by each person who was invited to dinner. In this case, "The first person who leaves the table should clear the rest of the dishes" is a norm that is true only because it is licensed by a stipulative true standard governing our behavior at dinner. In either case, I take it, the norm in question is merely formally normative, and its merely formal normativity is explained by the fact that it is licensed by a standard which is merely conventionally or stipulatively true.

We can adapt the details of this story to McPherson's own example of chess. Norms which specify how each chess piece is allowed to move on the chess board are authoritative because they are licensed by the chess-standard, i.e. the rules of chess. A particular move in a game of chess or a claim about chess is mistaken if it is inconsistent with what is licensed by the rules of chess. If asked why chess rules are what they are, it is correct to answer that they are what they are because of stipulation (perhaps in order to get the game started) or by convention ("this is simply how chess is played!"). Again following McPherson's example, imagine someone creating a game called *Schmess* which was

identical to chess except that its rules allow knights to move one square diagonally.

Though their rules contradict each other, there is no normative transgression involved in opting to play chess over schmess or vice versa because they are true by either stipulation or convention. Consequently, chess and schmess have standards which impart merely formal normativity to prescriptions made about their respective subject matters.

For minimalism to successfully answer the proliferation challenge, it must be the case that it has the resources to establish why there is something wrong with treating schmoral reasons as robustly normative. The negative criterion for robust normativity lets minimalism satisfy this necessary condition. That is, if the truth of the moral standard is *not* owed to choice, adoption, or stipulation, either collectively or individually and the schmoral standard *is*, we have ground for non-arbitrarily judging there to be a normative transgression in opting for the latter and the expense of the former. This judgment is non-arbitrary because the truth of a normative standard being owed to choice, adoption, or stipulation, is itself normatively significant. Suppose that the schmoral standard consists of just the following principle: “Necessarily, an action is required if and only if, and fully because it minimizes happiness”. According to this standard (in combination with physical and psychological facts pertaining to the given scenario), the claim “poking Sam in the eye would minimize her happiness” plausibly counts as a good schmoral reason to poke her in the eye. If “Poking Sam in the eye is required” is true according to a merely formally normative standard, then neither that standard nor that proposition ought to have distinctive authority in our practical deliberations. If “Poking Sam in the eye is required” is true and it is not the case that it is true only in virtue of being licensed by a merely formally

normative standard, then it ought to have distinctive authority in our practical deliberations.

This line of thought reflects our ordinary deliberative practices. It normally counts against taking a prescription for action as overridingly authoritative if it is prescribed because “this is just how things are done here”, as would be the case according to a conventional standard. Justifying the prescriptions of a robustly normative standard cannot, by definition according to this solution, involve appealing to the products of convention, choice, or stipulation. Consequently, the moral standard cannot succumb to the objection that moral prescriptions could be different if somewhere along the line someone had made a different decision regarding what ought to matter morally. It is not insignificant that nowhere in our ordinary deliberations does one find the practice of making reference to a “normative reality” to justify the importance of moral prescriptions, the truthmaker theorist’s solution to the proliferation challenge. If, on the other hand, the minimalist can answer the proliferation challenge with a successful solution that mirrors the practices of ordinary normative deliberation, this speaks well of the relative plausibility of the minimalist approach.

What this solution does not provide is a means by which someone can determine whether the moral or schmoral standard is robustly normative. However, the proliferation challenge does not demand of the minimalist that they present a solution to *this* problem. And nor should it; the truthmaker theorist claims that the advantage of their approach is that they have a means according to which the schmoral and moral standards can be differentiated *in principle*. Any demand that the minimalist provide an account according

to which we may decide between competing moral standards can be placed upon the truthmaker theorist as well.

It is natural to wonder whether this way of accounting for the difference between robust and merely formal normativity actually allows the minimalist to answer the proliferation challenge without giving up their minimalism. Nothing yet prevents the truthmaker theorist from nodding along with everything I have claimed so far. They might say enthusiastically, “Of course moral propositions are not true because of a standard that is stipulated or conventional—as I’ve said, they are true because there exist moral truthmakers which make them true!”. However, notice that this leap to the existence of moral truthmakers is now undermotivated. The minimalist and truthmaker theorist can agree that normative claims whose truth is owed to being in accord with a stipulated or conventional standard are not overridingly authoritative in our practical deliberations. By entailment, the normative claims which are overridingly authoritative in our practical deliberations are true not due to being in accord with a stipulated or conventional standard of correctness. That is, both the truthmaker theorist and the minimalist agree that the proper account of *that because of which* moral propositions are true does not make reference to stipulated or conventional standards of correctness. This is where the common ground runs out for the minimalist and the truthmaker theorist.

The truthmaker theorist, again, thinks moral truthmakers ought to feature in the complete account of that because of which moral propositions are true. But if the minimalist can point out what is distinctive about robust normativity because of what it is

not, it is fair for the minimalist to ask what motivates the truthmaker theorist's *positive* ontological/metaphysical claim about moral truthmakers. I.e., rather than implying the existence of truthmakers, this response by the minimalist lets them say that what makes moral claims robustly normative is what they are *not* made true by. Stipulated or conventional standards do *not* make moral claims true, for if such standards did, they would not have distinctive authority in our deliberations. Importantly, this negative solution is not an *ad hoc* reply designed to get the minimalist off the hook while retaining their minimalism. It tracks our normative commitments very nicely. If someone thought that the proposition "Torturing children for fun is wrong" was true because it was licensed by the conventional standard of the community they happened to live in, we would think they were making a grave mistake. Moreover, we would think there was something *morally* wrong with him. I.e. there seems to be something *morally* deficient about this imagined person—their belief seems to imply that in another community it might be possible that "it is good to torture children for fun" is true. "Don't you see that 'torturing children for fun is good' is just wrong, even if it is licensed by the commonly accepted standard?" is an appropriate question to put to this person.

That the solution to the proliferation challenge involves an invoking of a normative commitment squares nicely with the minimalist approach. Recall that the minimalist accepts that second-order claims like "Moral propositions are objectively true" and "there are moral facts" are true insofar as they convey, entail or are entailed by the correct normative commitments. The moral realist is right to defend these claims because thinking them false implies holding unacceptable normative commitments, such as

believing that every action is permissible. The proliferation challenge has argumentative force insofar as it makes a similar normative charge against Scanlon's minimalism. That is, the deficiency of Scanlon's view is that it does not account for the fact that normative claims which are made true by stipulation or conventional standards ought not to matter to us in our deliberations as much as true normative claims which are not so dependent. Thinking this normative claim false implies having the wrong normative commitments, such as believing there is no difference in domain-external preferability between the moral and schmoral domains.

I have no doubt that the truthmaker theorist who is reading along is not satisfied with this reply and would perhaps object that the minimalist has not yet done any work towards accounting for *that because of which* moral propositions are true. I have argued that whatever ought to be included in this account, it cannot include a standard of correctness which owes its truth merely to stipulation or convention. This blocks the proliferation of norms without positing the existence of truthmakers for what is properly treated as robustly normative. Does it follow that there *must* be something in the account of *that because of which* a claim is true if it is robustly normative? I fail to see why the minimalist ought to accept this entailment. Of course, we can account for that because of which particular normative claims like "Sam shouldn't be poked in the eye for fun" are true. Intuitively, I would try to point to some general principles or abstractly articulated norms that account for these particular truths. And it is plausible that the inability of someone to account for that because of which they are true implies that there is something rationally problematic about accepting them. However, if we work our way back in these

justifications to general moral principles such as “One ought not dehumanize anyone arbitrarily”, it is not obvious that there is any further productive answer to be found in a search for *that because of which* they are true and overridingly authoritative. Importantly, the bare minimalist claim here is that this is not *obvious*, not that any further inquiry is unnecessary or unproductive. To be sure, the truthmaker theorist believes that the ultimate ground of these general principles is existing moral truthmakers, but faced with the minimalist whose default position does not involve acceptance of MTMC, it is up to the truthmaker theorist to present reasons to believe.

Chapter 5: The Epistemic Condition

Introduction

Chapters 1 and 2 of this work constitute an attempt to construct a well-behaved version of metaethical minimalism—one that reflects a common strain in the work of contemporary metaethicists who are skeptical of metaethical ontology. Chapters 3 and 4 comprised a defense of this thesis from challenges to it that can be found in the contemporary literature. Insofar as metaethical minimalism is a philosophical stance regarding what we can do without (moral truthmakers), the work of the preceding chapters can be understood as the construction and defense of a largely *negative* project. While there is nothing wrong with engaging in a philosophical project that is meant solely to dissuade, it is fair to wonder if there is anything else for the metaethical minimalist to do. There are quietist leanings found in the thought of writers whose work I've taken as paradigmatic instances of minimalism.³² The sense one gets from some of these thinkers is that there is not much (if any) work for the *meta*-ethicist to do once they have acknowledged the grounds of moral truths are domain-internal principles or standards, not existent truthmakers. However, this austere domain-internalism is in danger of eliding some of the most pressing philosophical mysteries left for the minimalist to solve; first, the issue of what secures the difference between truthmaker-backed truths about reality and normative truths; and second, the necessary conditions of our having knowledge of normative truths in the first place. This chapter is aimed at resolving this first mystery in a way which results in an adequate understanding of the distinction between the objects of

³² E.g. Dworkin (1996, 2011), Parfit (2011), and Scanlon (2014)

purely normative thoughts and objects of thoughts about reality. Building on this positive picture are chapters 6 and 7, which argue in favor of an account of the relationship between emotion and evaluative knowledge that is consistent with metaethical minimalism.

There is positive work left for the minimalist. The minimalist does not have to be a quietist, nor do all metaethical minimalists embrace quietism. This is exemplified by Skorupski's (2009) account of why certain actualities exist and certain ones do not exist, which marries quite well with his minimalism. If it is a fact that moral propositions do not require truthmakers in order to be true, the minimalist ought to be curious about why moral propositions differ from reality-reflective propositions in this regard. More importantly, the minimalist ought to have a way of responding to questions about why these two domains differ so radically—what is distinctive about matters of fact about reality such that the things they are about truly exist, whereas value, reasons, and moral prescriptions, while actual, cannot be said to exist? Put another way, what is to “exist”? How can we analyze the state of *existing* such that we can in turn grasp in what sense existents differ from mere actualities like reasons, value and fictions?

According to the semantic condition, there is no difference between what is actual and what exists. Following Skorupski, we will regard the semantic condition as the idea that “whatever can be thought and talked about is real” (421) or “To be real is to be the semantic value of a (possible) term or variable” (421). While first I will briefly review Skorupski's ordinary language evidence against it, the main argumentative work of this chapter presupposes the inadequacy of the semantic condition. This is not because the

semantic condition is baldly implausible, but for the reason that if the semantic condition is true, metaethical minimalism is false. If the value, reason, or other normative objects of our normative judgments are real in virtue of these judgments being true, then normative judgments, when true, are *made true* by this normative stuff existing in reality. For metaethical minimalism to work, there must be an alternative to the semantic condition. This chapter is aimed at both rejecting one such attempt and offering another in its stead.

Skorupski takes the widespread acceptance of the semantic condition to be explainable by Quine's influence over the development and practice of analytic philosophy in the latter half of the 20th century.³³ This influence, according to Skorupski, has not been a wholly positive force. This analysis is similar to Parfit's and Putnam's in that they too reject the Quinean approach to ontology and believe it is at the heart of the mistakes made by metaphysically-inflationary metaethics. Expressed in logical terms, the semantic condition entails taking every instance of true existential quantification to be an expression of the existence of that which is quantified over. I.e. the semantic condition understands every proposition analyzable as an instance of the expression "There is an x" to be an attestation of the existence and reality of X.

Rejecting the semantic condition in favor of some other criterion for existence allows for the possibility of treating some of the objects of the true claims of our discourse as unreal or non-existent. Doing so would not be merely an ad hoc convenience for the metaethical minimalist, but it would make a great deal of sense on its own. Discussion of non-existent objects is not difficult to find in our ordinary discourse; judgments about

³³ See Skorupski (2010), esp. pp. 420-423

fictional characters, imaginary objects, and possible features of real objects are not foreign to our ordinary conversation. Skorupski thinks that abstract objects like propositions, universals, and possible worlds are also irreal; we can refer to them and make true assertions about them, but to say we “refer” to them is not to make a metaphysical claim, but rather to assert that it is possible for them to be a value of a variable. I.e. it is a mistake to claim on the basis of this semantic fact (their referability) that they are *real* and, therefore, existent. Importantly, abstract objects are different from fictions or imaginary objects in virtue of the fact that their nature—i.e. what is true of them—is not dependent upon what we or anyone else thinks about them.

The non-quietist minimalist wants to be able to draw a distinction between what is real/existent and what is not (and is perhaps only “actual”) using a philosophically sound principle that vindicates their minimalistic treatment of norms. This is the role Skorupski wants “the causal condition” to play. According to it, the objects of pure normative judgments (value, reasons, etc.) can be the value of a variable in an existential claim and therefore *referred* to unproblematically. However, like propositions, universals, and possible worlds, they are not the kind of thing that can bump into, act upon, or be acted upon by any other object. Consequently, they cannot be measured, weighed, or documented in space and time. According to the semantic condition, these facts about norms place no restriction upon their reality. According to the causal condition, these facts entail that norms are not part of reality and therefore do not exist. If the causal condition is a suitable replacement for the semantic condition for the metaethical minimalist, then it must be able to do two things: 1) neatly divide up the domain of discourse into real objects

and unreal objects and 2) determine that normative objects fall into the latter category. In the first part of this chapter, I argue why the causal condition fails to meet these goals. In the second part of this chapter, I offer my replacement condition which, I argue, does a better job.

The Inadequacy of the Causal Condition

First, I wish to emphasize that I will not argue that the causal condition fails because I believe we have good reason to think either that there are causally inert objects which exist or that there are causally efficacious objects which do not exist. That is, my replacement condition is likely perfectly consistent with an intuitive division of objects according to their causal efficacy. The problem with the causal condition is that Skorupski's notion of causation is too vague to secure a *principled* line-drawing between real and unreal, which is the intended purpose of the causal condition. Consequently, the division of real and unreal objects according to it is not sufficiently determined such that we are able to avoid relying on a merely intuitive understanding of what is real in order to prevent problematic classifications. I illustrate this point in what follows.

Skorupski finds support for the causal condition in the works of Plato and other historical figures, according to whom "the real is whatever has causal standing" (30). A consequence of this standard is that it is either the case that the objects of normative thought have causal standing or any question about their existence is committed to a presupposition error. For many if not most metaethicists, even among those who are truthmaker theorists, norms are not causally efficacious, and Skorupski agrees: "reason

relations are unreal; they have no causal standing” (439). Therefore, norms, value, and reasons are not, according to the causal condition, to be included in a complete account of reality, even if it is possible to make true claims about them. Skorupski is sensitive to the idea that “causal standing” is often presumed to be a natural phenomenon. He does not want his cognitive irrealism to beg the question against non-naturalists, so he leaves open the possibility of non-natural causation in his account, making room for a divine progenitor of the natural world. According to Skorupski, this undetermined idea of cause is of no relevance to the concern about the reality of norms:

“The real is that which has causal standing. How widely the notion of cause should be understood is a further philosophical question; but however widely we understand it, I argue, this criterion makes reason relations unreal. It does not follow that propositions about them cannot be true, and it does not follow that reason relations are fictions or constructs. They are what they are, independently of what we think they are.” (30)

Whether or not causation should be understood naturalistically is perhaps a further philosophical question. I am willing to concede that Skorupski does not need to resolve this debate in order for his cognitive irrealism to work. Whatever it is we mean by “causation”, we should not think that it is a definitional matter that it only occurs between objects that exist in time and space.

However, Skorupski does owe his reader *some* account of causation that allows for a proper determination of difficult cases. Here is a partial list of objects Skorupski wants to regard as causally engaged and therefore real: natural objects, including mental and

non-mental events, and possibly God. Here is a partial list of objects Skorupski wishes to regard as not causally engaged and therefore unreal: normative objects and relations, fictions, abstractions, and numbers. I agree completely with this division of objects, but what I aim to show is unclear is whether the causal condition decides how each kind of object should be categorized. Most pressingly, what is required is an account of why ostensibly efficacious interactions between unreals and reals ought not be counted as instances of causation.

Consider the claims

- 1) "Sam is going to fulfill her promise because that is what she ought to do"
and
- 2) "The moral goodness of Barry's act moved Alan to tears."

In 1) and 2) physical behavior is ostensibly being explained by what Skorupski certainly would regard as unreal: a moral duty and the moral value of an act. If it is *because* of her moral duty that Sam fulfills her promise, then why is it not true that this duty caused her to perform whatever action is required of her? If it is the moral goodness of Barry's action that *moved* Alan so, why is this not an instance of this value exercising its causal power upon Alan? Skorupski might answer plausibly by pointing out that there are easy reinterpretations of these sentences that succeed in confining their normative subject-matter to an unreal domain. Perhaps the sense of "because" in the first sentence is a *justifying* sense; that Sam is duty-bound by her promise *justifies* her acting in such a way that she fulfills her promise. Perhaps in 2) it is not the moral goodness itself that is moving Alan, but rather the thought or perception of Barry's action accompanied by a judgment

of its goodness. Even supposing these reinterpretations plausible, the problem with the causal condition is that it does not provide a means by which we decide between them and a literal reading of 1) and 2). I am inclined to opt for the reinterpretations, but this is because I believe norms and value to be non-real and therefore incapable of causing movement in the physical world. But of course neither my nor anyone else's *inclinations* should matter at all in this debate, especially if the reality or irreality of normativity is exactly what we looked to the causal condition to determine.

1) and 2) are examples of difficult cases in which there is an ostensible interaction between what Skorupski regards as unreal and the real. The causal condition also runs into difficulty when trying to account for interactions between fictional entities:

3) "Voldemort's attack caused a lightning-shaped scar to form on Harry Potter's forehead."

Voldemort does not exist, nor does Harry Potter, and nor does his scar. According to the causal condition, this means that none of these objects has "causal standing". How then should we explain the truth of 3)? Skorupski's cognitive irrealism is meant to allow for the possibility of true beliefs and statements about fictional entities. This is a good consequence of Skorupski's position: after all, if I believed that Voldemort's attack caused there to be an avocado-shaped scar on Harry Potter's forehead, I would be quite clearly getting something wrong. More importantly for our purposes, if I believed that Voldemort's attack *did not* cause there to be a scar on Harry Potter's forehead, then I would also be incorrect.

We *of course* know that the characters and events in Harry Potter are not real. We also *of course* know that 3) does not describe a genuine instance of causation. Worryingly for the prospects of the causal condition, however, is that upon reflection it appears we know the latter fact in virtue of a grasp of the former fact. We know that Voldemort's attack is not capable of genuinely causing a scar because none of the events in *Harry Potter* ever occurred and none of its characters are real. But notice that this implies that *reality* is what explains genuine causation, not the other way around. That is, it appears our ideas of reality and existence *precede* causation. What is needed to make the causal condition work is an account of "genuine" causation that does not make reference to the reality of the causal relata while also discounting the possibility of genuine causation occurring between fictional objects.

According to Skorupski, "The causal condition says that a real object has a set of attributes in virtue of which it is affected by and affects other things in its distinctive way" (427). There is no obvious candidate for what is distinctive about interactions between real existents, especially if Skorupski wants to leave open the possibility of non-natural causation. His dilemma is this: If interactions between irreal *are* instances of causation, then irreal turn out to be a kind of real existent. If such interactions are *not* instances of causation, then the reason for this should be captured by an account of genuine causation that does not beg the question in minimalism's favor. Skorupski offers no such account while also rejecting the first horn of this dilemma. Consequently, we are forced to help along the causal condition's categorization of objects as real and irreal using our intuition. This leaves the metaethical minimalist on just as unprincipled ground as when they offered

their rejection of the semantic condition. A fundamental dilemma for the minimalist thus presents itself again: find some other principled distinction between the existent object of thoughts about reality and the object of normative thought or else embrace quietism.

The Epistemic Condition

The non-quietist minimalist needs a criterion for what is real/existent which grounds their belief in the difference between true propositions which do require truthmakers (reality-reflecting truths) and true propositions which do not require truthmakers (e.g. normative truths).³⁴ For it to be an improvement over Skorupski's causal condition, this criterion should also vindicate the common sense idea that fictional entities are non-real, even if some propositions in which they are referenced are true. This is the role I suggest for the "the epistemic condition". Whereas the causal condition claims that what is distinctive about real entities is their ability to stand in causal relations, the epistemic condition says that what is distinctive about real entities is the manner in which it is possible to have non-inferential knowledge of them.

According to the epistemic condition, something (X) is real/existent insofar as 1) it is, *in principle*, possible for some epistemic agent have non-inferential knowledge of X and 2) a necessary condition upon having this non-inferential knowledge of X is a conception-independent presentation of X to the epistemic agent.

³⁴ As always, it is worth flagging again that many, if not most, normative judgments involve claims about what is the case physically and temporally (e.g. The opposing generals at the battle of Thermopylae were both brave). I hope the reader will allow me to proceed under the assumption that by "normative proposition" I mean that a proposition that has purely normative subject-matter or a proposition for which it is possible to isolate its normative subject-matter and ask what it is in virtue of which its normative assessment/claim is true.

There is a great deal to unpack in this claim. First, By “non-inferential” knowledge I mean the sort of knowledge that can be acquired by an epistemic agent immediately, without deliberation, upon being presented with the object of that knowledge . A paradigmatic case of this kind is perceptual knowledge; one doesn’t need to consider premises in syllogistic form in an effort to deduce the color of the objects of one’s visual experience. A sighted person with the capacity to experience color simply sees that the fire-engine is red; in the seeing of this object (under normal conditions), they come to know that it is red non-inferentially. Conversely, if you see smoke rising above a forest in the distance, you may come to know that there is a fire occurring in the forest on the basis of this experience. However, it is through inference that you form your belief about the fire, not non-inferentially upon being directly presented with the fire.

It is important to emphasize that I am referring to inference or lack thereof at the level of conscious deliberation. There may be some notion of subpersonal inference that is indispensable for adequate causal explanations of direct perception, but this is not of immediate relevance to the epistemic distinction that the epistemic condition relies on.

I do not wish to place any strict restrictions upon the kind of knowledge that we must be able to gain of real objects in order for them to satisfy criterion 1) of the epistemic condition. That is, I take it that when we gain non-inferential knowledge of real existent object X, the content of this knowledge can vary; we may, along with judging there to be such an object (“There is an x”), judge this object to have certain attributes or properties. The minimal constraint is that this knowledge must be analyzable as involving an existential claim about its subject matter. That this is necessary can be shown by

considering a case without such a claim: if I look out my window, see a bird, and form the belief with the content “All birds are blue”, it is a) difficult to see how a justified version of this belief could not be a product of inference and b) not apparent that there’s a referenced object whose reality or existence is in question.

There are many things which are or were at one time in existence which we humans do not have the ability to form non-inferential knowledge of due to our spatial or temporal distance from them. The epistemic condition does not contradict this fact. For the epistemic condition, what is distinctive about objects in reality is that it is “in principle” possible for an epistemic agent to have non-inferential knowledge of them. That is, for an object to exist it must be possible to come up with a set of conditions under which it is or would have been possible for an epistemic agent, perhaps one with superhuman epistemic capacities, to form non-inferential knowledge of it. Sometimes this test involves imagining a person at a temporally and spatially distant point with microscope-like vision, able to withstand the hostile environment of a black hole. Sometimes it involves imagining an interaction with a particle posited by physicists which no human could ever perceive directly, but some other imaginary species’s perception of involves a tingly feeling in their big toe. I use the term “perception” because it is an easily grasped instance of non-inferential knowledge formation, but it should not be understood restrictively as vision. The non-sighted person can *perceive* a ball through the experience of systematically-occurring patterns of pressure felt in their hands and fingers.

The principle referenced by the locution “in principle” in the epistemic condition is not a natural or causal principle, but a principle governing the possibilities we can

conceive of for this type of object and an epistemic interaction with it. For some objects referenced in our discourse, it is not possible to conceive of conditions under which we can have non-inferential knowledge of them; these objects are not real/existent in virtue of being unable to satisfy criterion 1) of the epistemic condition. Plausible candidates include objects which are *only* constructs of imagination (we are right to think our imaginary epistemic agent with microscope eyes is not real), mythological entities, posits of incorrect scientific theories, and fictional entities. Even if it is true that Voldemort's attack caused a scar to form on Harry Potter's head, neither Voldemort, the attack, the scar, or Harry Potter are capable of being the object of non-inferential knowledge of an epistemic agent. This is because they are non-existent fictional entities. We come to know them through the words written about them by J.K. Rowling—as the author of *Harry Potter*, her process is not one of “finding out” about these events but rather imagining them. If the epistemic condition is an improvement upon the causal condition with regard to the categorization of fictional entities as non-real, it is because its first criterion disqualifies them from being real.

At this point, you might be asking: “Can't we imagine that there was an epistemic agent present for Voldemort's attack on Harry Potter and the formation of his scar? Doesn't this satisfy criterion 1) of the epistemic condition?”. I can see this question being asked in two different ways. First, it may be that you are imagining a case in which the attack as described in *Harry Potter* actually occurs for someone to witness; if this is the scenario, then I believe you are imagining fictional events to be real. If this is the case, then there is no problem for the epistemic condition because it says that all real events must be,

in-principle, able to be non-inferentially known. The epistemic condition successfully predicts our intuition that such a scenario would involve real entities.

Second, it may be the case that you are imagining a witness being present in the context of the fiction—i.e. as part of the story itself. If it were, in principle, possible for this fictional witness to have non-inferential knowledge of Voldemort's attack, this would suggest that the epistemic condition is too permissive and represents no improvement upon the causal condition with respect to its categorization of fictional entities. That is, just as it was with the causal condition, we would find instances in fictional settings where the epistemic condition's criteria are met. Finding the solution to this problem requires attending to the difference between the imaginability of two separate scenarios: a) someone being a non-inferential knower of some matter of fact and b) the non-inferential knowability of that matter of fact. If I asked you to imagine an expert aura-reader who is able to detect a person's energy upon meeting them, I am asking you to imagine them playing an authoritative role with respect to a certain subject-matter and the corresponding authoritative function of their non-inferential judgments about it. This is different from trying to imagine a set of conditions under which auras can be non-inferentially known—this is not possible; any search, imaginary or otherwise, for them will come up empty because there are no such things as auras. Because auras are purportedly real, while we can imagine that there are auras, this is to imagine them as if there were a set of conditions under which we can non-inferentially come to know them.

We can imagine that there is a witness to Voldemort's attack on Harry Potter by imagining that there is someone who plays the role of non-inferential knower of it in the

context of the fiction; perhaps this witness will go on to report the attack to other characters, moving the plot forward. However, this is different from trying to imagine a fictional event being non-inferentially knowable by a fictional epistemic agent; imagining the conditions under which this could take place requires imagining the agent having a perspective on these events. Imagining what it is to have a perspective on an event is to imagine it to be real; there is no other way for this perspective to be thought of. That is, during any successful imagining of this case we cannot help ourselves from imagining what it would be like if the event witnessed were real. This is true of all imagined perspective-taking on objects we know not to be real, including auras (I can imagine what it would be like for an aura-reader to perceive auras—this is to imagine that auras exist for them to see). These are things about which it is not in principle possible to have non-inferential knowledge of but *imaginable* that it is in principle possible to have non-inferential knowledge of by imagining them to be real. This is essentially a restatement of the epistemic condition. In such cases, while it is not possible to imagine any set of conditions under which the object referenced in our discourse can be non-inferentially known, it is possible to imagine the object as a different kind of thing—the kind of thing for which there *is* a set of conditions under which it is non-inferentially knowable, i.e. real.

The upshot is that there are any number of objects which do not exist but which we can imagine to exist. This is often precisely the same act as imagining that is, in principle, possible for someone to have non-inferential of these objects. If I am correct, then what is impossible is the following: imagining that it is, in principle, possible to have

non-inferential knowledge of a spatio-temporal object or event (like those in the *Harry Potter* case) without simultaneously imagining that object or event to exist.

If the preceding argument is sound, then criterion 1) of the epistemic condition allows for the principled differentiation of real objects from imaginary, hypothetical, and fictional objects. Criterion 2) of the epistemic condition is meant to allow the metaethical minimalist to differentiate between two classes of objects which both satisfy the first condition, i.e. to create a subclass (“existent objects”) among all those objects about which it is possible to form non-inferential knowledge. It claims that there is a condition specific to forming non-inferential knowledge of existent objects: a conception-independent presentation of them to the epistemic agent.

Criterion 2

Like with criterion 1), there is a great deal to unpack in criterion 2). One easy way to illustrate the nature of this condition on non-inferential knowledge of existent objects is to contrast it with the formation of non-inferential knowledge that is not conditioned in this way. If the epistemic condition works for the metaethical minimalist’s purposes, an example of the latter must be non-inferential knowledge about normative subject matter. As a test case, I will focus on non-inferential moral evaluations, i.e. immediate judgments of the moral worth of actions and traits of character.

The process of acquiring knowledge of the moral value of actions and acquiring knowledge of the empirical properties of objects can look similar, if not identical. I can witness someone saving a child from drowning and simultaneously come to know about

the physical properties of the objects constituting this event and also form an immediate judgment of the exemplary nature of this act. However, this is the essential point: coming to non-inferentially know about the act's moral value does not require our being present for its occurrence, but having non-inferential knowledge of the physical properties of the event *does* require our being present for their occurrence. If I were to describe the situation of saving a drowning child to you, it is as easy for you to come to "see" the moral value of acting in the way the savior did just as it was for me upon seeing it first-hand. Put another way, you are no less an authority on the matter of the worthiness of an act of saving a drowning child simply in virtue of your having not been there to see it. This is of course, conditioned upon having accurate beliefs about the physical properties of this event; if you did not know that by attempting to save the child the savior was increasing the likelihood of pain or death for other people, you would not be a reliable authority on any matter relating to the event.

Of course it doesn't always work like this. Sometimes we need to *infer* the rightness or wrongness of an act by carefully considering whether it violates or conforms to some moral principle. This is often what happens with difficult cases about which it is hard to form immediate judgments. However, what is distinctive about normative facts is, *when we are able to come to non-inferentially know about them*, we are able to do so from the armchair, so long as we are given access to the relevant information concerning the surrounding circumstances.

"Conception-independent Presentation"

The epistemic condition references the fact that non-inferential knowledge about objects in reality requires a “conception-independent presentation” of that object. My use of “presentation” is intended to be a descriptor of a class of epistemically-relevant events which includes both perception and non-perceptual intuition. What unites perception and what is sometimes called “intellectual intuition”³⁵ is that both factor into explanations or accounts of non-inferential belief formation. While the epistemic condition suggests there are important differences between the two kinds of epistemically-relevant events and the conditions of their resulting in knowledge, it recognizes the similarity between them. Namely, that each requires a “seeing” or beholding of the relevant fact or object. Both the object of perception and the object of intuition are *present* for the epistemic agent. The difference between the two events is the manner in which they are presented, or their “presentation”. Presentation is meant to be neutral between representational accounts of perception and intuition and direct-realist accounts of perception and intuition. Whether the object is directly apprehended as it is or whether it is apprehended via a mental intermediary, the epistemically relevant point for our purposes is that it is presented as a ground of unmediated belief/judgment formation. Unmediated, that is, by inference. “Presentings” are those instances in which an object is available for non-inferential judgment.

A “conception-independent” presentation is one which occurs outside (or in addition to) the conception of the epistemic agent. This can best be understood by first understanding the nature of a presentation that occurs within the conception of the

³⁵ See e.g. Humer (2007)

epistemic agent. If I asked you to imagine a black cat jumping over a fence, and subsequently asked you to report on what color fur this cat has, your judgment of the latter is based on your presentation of the cat to yourself in conception. Of course, in this case, the fact about the fur this cat has is also *choice*-dependent. For the metaethical minimalist to use the epistemic condition effectively to their desired ends, it must be the case that there are facts which can be presented to us in conception, about which we can form non-inferential judgments, and are *not* choice-dependent. Recall the example of the person saving the child from drowning. By “in an epistemic agent’s conception”, I mean precisely the medium of thought in which you play out this scenario to yourself and are able to come to “see” the moral worth of the savior’s action. The similarity between considering the value of this act and imagining the cat is that both are scenarios, upon the consideration of their details, involving the epistemic agent playing out the events for themselves to make judgments about. This is what I mean by a presentation in conception. The *difference* between these two presentations is that the presentation of moral worth of the action is not a matter of choice on the part of the epistemic agent. We can, of course, imagine what it would be like if things were different and play out *another* scenario in our minds, but we cannot hold every detail of the savior’s act in our minds constant and choose to alter only its moral worth. That is, we can’t do so without being incorrect in our judgment—what is correct about this normative matter, unlike the color of the imaginary cat, is not up to our choosing.

A presentation which occurs independently of our conception is one featuring objects independent of the epistemic agent imaginative or conceptual medium of

presentation. Most naturally, we think of this as perception. It's difficult to think of non-perceptual examples of conception-independent presentations, but one possible example is the experience of a divine or supernatural presence, depending on how one analyzes this phenomenon. As discussed above, we cannot form non-inferential knowledge without being presented with the object of this knowledge, and we cannot form non-inferential knowledge of real states of affairs without being presented with the object of this knowledge independently of our conception. More simply put, you can't have an experience of something real without perceiving it. We should be permissive with respect to how this presentation occurs; video footage of the surface of Mars transmitted by a rover plausibly counts as a conception-independent presentation of the surface of Mars. However, there are difficult edge cases; judgments formed about the state of play of a baseball game based on a radio play-by-play may not count as non-inferential judgments because hearing the testimony of the broadcaster may not count as an unmediated presentation of the game. Solving these edge cases is not of importance here. For the epistemic condition to do the work the metaethical minimalist needs it to do, it must be the case that existent objects are those about which we cannot have an experience or intuition if they are presented to us merely in conception. For if this is so, then this is what is distinctive about them in comparison to objects of normative thought.

Necessity and The Epistemic Condition

Before proceeding, I want to make clear what kind of claim is being made about the conditions upon non-inferential knowledge. One possible interpretation of the claims

“It is possible to form non-inferential knowledge of moral facts from the armchair” and “It is not possible to form non-inferential knowledge of empirical facts from the armchair” is one which takes them to be justified by observation of cases. So construed, it is a fact about humans that it is not psychologically possible for us to non-inferentially know empirical facts from the armchair and it is not contradictory to believe it possible that this could change as a result of a change in our psychology. The problem with this approach is that the metaethical minimalist needs the epistemic condition to be (or reflect) a principle about the nature of normativity and reality, not an empirical claim about human psychology. That is, we set out at the beginning of this chapter to find an account that makes sense of the difference between propositions whose truth do depend on truthmakers and those that do not. Explaining this difference by appealing to psychological facts about how these truths come to be known threatens to reduce the minimalist view on the ontology of normativity to psychologism.

An alternative is regarding the epistemic condition as a claim about different conditions under which we are disqualified from being a non-inferential authority on two categories of fact. That is, there is a condition under which non-inferential empirical judgments are disqualified from being authoritative, but this same condition of disqualification does not hold for the authority of non-inferential normative judgments. Your non-inferential empirical judgment cannot be authoritative if you had no conception-independent presentation of the object of that judgment, precisely in virtue of not having that conception-independent presentation. That is, a lack of an accompanying presentation of this sort is sufficient for a non-inferential judgment’s disqualification from

being authoritative on a matter of reality. Unlike these reality-reflective judgments, non-inferential normative judgments are not disqualified from being authoritative in virtue of not being preceded by a conception-independent presentation of their object.

This is simply a restatement of the observation I made about these categories of judgment above—we need to be present for an event to form non-inferentially knowledge about its physical makeup; we do not *need* to be present for an event to form non-inferential knowledge about its normative makeup. Put in the language of disqualification; my non-inferential judgment about the moral quality of a person’s act of saving a drowning child is not disqualified from being authoritative due to the fact I was not present to observe the act directly. However, a judgment I make about the color of the shirt the child was wearing *is* disqualified from being an authoritative non-inferential one precisely because I was not present to observe the act directly. So construed, the epistemic condition reflects a fact about the necessary conditions of the possibility of non-inferential knowledge about normative and existent subject matter. These are reflective of the kind of thing these two kinds of judgments are about. Happily for the metaethical minimalist, because there are different necessary conditions upon non-inferentially knowing about them, this is a good reason to suppose that normative and empirical objects are different kinds of things. This means that the epistemic condition is not merely an expression of the *contingent* conditions for epistemic agents with human psychology of being able to non-inferentially know about normative or empirical objects.

With this interpretation of the necessity expressed by the epistemic condition, let us turn to some final examples to illustrate its plausibility. Imagine we each read a

complete and accurate account of the physical details of the battle of Thermopylae. This account includes every detail of the battle down to the directions and strength of each breeze occurring throughout. Despite our exposure to this credible testimony, our thoughts and beliefs about the battle of Thermopylae do not count as authoritative *perceptions* of the real objects or state of affairs constituting that event. We do not see what physically occurred at Thermopylae upon being exposed to a second-hand account. This is because, despite the accuracy of our beliefs, our temporal distance from the event disqualifies us from having an “observer” status. Simply put, we do not and cannot have non-inferential knowledge of the objects present or states of affairs occurring at the battle of Thermopylae.

However, notice that our temporal distance from the event does not on its own disqualify us from having non-inferential *evaluative* knowledge of these events. Upon hearing this description of the events, I non-inferentially judge that certain actions undertaken are courageous and others are cowardly. Upon reading this first-hand account, I can intuit or see (in an analogical sense) that a particular instance of a Spartan soldier standing their ground in an act of self-sacrifice is courageous. The lack of a proximate interaction between the state of affairs and the evaluator does not *necessarily* bear on the authority of their evaluation, while it does for perception. In fact, a substantial temporal and spatial distance may sometimes be *an aid* for gaining unmediated, non-inferential evaluative knowledge of these events. That is, because the distractions present at the battle itself, we may be more authoritative evaluators precisely because of our relative distance from it. Of course, our evaluations’ accuracy and relevancy depend upon the accuracy of

the testimony and subsequent thoughts we have about the battle. The present point is that no maximally accurate discursive or iconic representation of a temporally distant state of affairs could result in the perception of those state of affairs. This is not an empirical fact about the causal processes constituting human perception, but a normative principle about which judgments count as having “observational” status or which persons count as first-hand “observers” of an event. These “observation”-statuses have relevance to our goal of navigating the space of reasons, i.e. of determining what we are justified in believing and saying. My claim is that the mere fact that the object of evaluation is a discursive representation or imagined in conception does not, on its own, disqualify an evaluator from forming an authoritative non-inferential intuition about what was good or bad about the state of affairs represented. This is a fundamental epistemic difference between objects of judgments about reality and the objects of normative judgments—non-inferential knowledge of the latter is allowable under conditions in which judgments of the former are disqualified from having the status of being non-inferential knowledge. This is not to say that under these conditions we cannot have knowledge of what exists, only that this knowledge is not observational--i.e. it is not non-inferential.

This distinction pervades our deliberations about normative matters: Harman’s (1988) example of a cat being set on fire for the amusement of a crowd works because it is so intuitively wrong—that is, we have no problem intuiting that any instance like this is wrong, if it were to occur. Let us suppose such a situation is occurring right now in a New York City alleyway. We do not actually need to be in spatial proximity to that situation to

intuit it's wrongness, while we do need to be in spatial proximity to this particular event to perceive the heat of the flame or the size of the cat. If someone insisted on withholding immediate judgment about the cruelty of this event on the grounds that they must see this event in person before they can justly say that they see that it's cruel, we would think something strange or evasive about them. This defective evaluator is not one who is questioning the accuracy or completeness of the account, but rather someone who accepts both its accuracy and completeness but still can't bring themselves to admit that they see that such an action is cruel. Conversely, it *would* be appropriate for the same individual to deny that he can be a stand-alone authority on the size of the cat or color of the flame. This is so even if they have been exposed to a written account of both details—after all, he hasn't seen the cat or the flame!

A corollary of the above point is that the goodness of an act is located in reality because its *goodness* need not be non-inferentially known only via observation. That is to say, while the physical nature of this act is non-inferentially known only if one is sufficiently proximate to the event, spatial, temporal, and causal distance does not on its own disqualify a person from having an authoritative intuition about its goodness. I have only second- or third-hand knowledge of the events surrounding the Chernobyl disaster, but if this testimony is true, it is with great confidence that I judge that the actions of those who knowingly sacrificed their own lives to prevent a global nuclear disaster are morally good. The epistemic quality of my judgments of the goodness of these acts (if they occurred) is not compromised because of my temporal and spatial distance from their physical occurrence.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to this chapter I wish to make two qualifying points about the previous argumentation and the epistemic condition. The first is to point out the epistemic condition is not a wholesale departure from the causal condition. The causal condition ran into problems for not having a restrictive enough notion of causation to prevent problematic cases from being categorized incorrectly. The epistemic condition suggests that what is distinctive about existent objects is the necessity of a particular kind of interaction to occur in order for them to produce a particular effect. This can be interpreted as a kind of restrictive causal condition, one which sets existent objects apart from those objects for whom causal descriptions are possible but lack the *dependency* upon causal interaction to be non-inferentially known. I have chosen to not rely on any invocation of causation when offering a description of the epistemic condition so as to not rely on a notion which caused problems for the metaethical minimalist in the first place. However, once the epistemic condition is in place, it is easy to see how it might ground a notion of “genuine causation” that allows Skorupski’s causal condition to do the work he intended for it.

Finally, the epistemic condition is not meant to serve as the final word on that in virtue of which objects are real/existent. Recall that its purpose is to provide the metaethical minimalist a means of making sense of the difference between propositions which do require truthmakers in order to be true and those which do not. As it turned out, this involved a distinction between the *objects* referenced in our discourse that are

real/existent and those which are not. In order to make sense of this latter distinction, the epistemic condition points out that non-inferential knowledge of what is existent has a necessary condition for its formation that non-inferential knowledge of what is not existent though actual does not. The fact that there is this extra condition on non-inferential knowledge of existent objects may be explainable by some further metaphysical fact about reality and the entities contained therein. It may even be reasonable to expect that some further fact about reality *must* explain this epistemic fact about real objects. In the dialectic as I've described it, the metaethical minimalist set out to find a principled ground to stand on to draw their distinction between existent and merely actual normative objects, they do not need to pronounce this principle as the ultimate ground upon which all truths about reality depend.

Chapter 6: Transcendental Sentimentalism

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, it is argued that the metaethical minimalist can, despite their minimalism, make a positive contribution to metaethics and the metaphysics of moral epistemology. This was in an attempt to distinguish metaethical minimalism from metaethical quietism. This effort is continued in the present chapter, wherein I present a picture of the relation between evaluative thought and sentiment that is consistent with metaethical minimalism. However, unlike in the preceding chapter, it is not necessary for the metaethical minimalist to accept what is described here in order to defend or articulate their minimalist position. It is perfectly coherent to imagine a metaethical minimalist who rejects sentimentalism. Additionally, transcendental sentimentalism is a position the adoption of which need not be accompanied by the adoption of metaethical minimalism. They are each consistent with while also independent of each other. *A propos* of this fact, the chapter that follows will be a stand-alone articulation of transcendental sentimentalism. The lesson *vis a vis* metaethical minimalism is that the minimalist can, while denying that there are truthmakers which make true moral propositions true, paint a positive meta-level picture of our practices of ethical deliberations and judgement-making.

The notion that our capacity for sentiment is in some way tied up with our practice of offering moral evaluations has a degree of prima facie plausibility that is rare

among philosophical theses. This may be for no other reason than we often feel very strongly about what is right and wrong, with these feelings often amounting to something over and above the sort of convictions we have about non-normative matters. Of course, if emotions are “in some way tied up with” our evaluative capacities, the interesting philosophical work lies in the specification of this relation. If the strong feelings we have about value were nothing but mere correlations or psychological epiphenomena, they would in no way help *explain* the nature of evaluative judgment. The moral sentimentalist rejects this picture; for them, the relationship between emotions and evaluative judgment is explanatorily significant. However, sentimentalist theories vary widely on the precise explanatory role they find for sentiments. This chapter will add to this variety by identifying a distinct form of sentimentalism I will call “Transcendental Sentimentalism.” Transcendental Sentimentalism (hereafter, “TS”) claims that having or having had a sentimental response to x is a necessary condition of the possibility of a person counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of x.

The structure of this chapter will be as follows: First, I introduce TS by unpacking the core elements of its target explanandum and the explanatory role it posits for the sentiments—namely, “non-inferential evaluative knowledge”, what it is to “count as having” this knowledge, and being a “necessary condition of the possibility” of this knowledge. A consequence of clarifying the nature of these components will be a differentiation of TS from other forms of sentimentalism presently on offer. Antti Kauppinen, esp. in his (2014) and (forthcoming), has led the way in clarifying and classifying contemporary sentimentalist views, taxonomizing the field under the following

categories: explanatory sentimentalism, judgment sentimentalism, metaphysical sentimentalism, and epistemological sentimentalism. Showing that TS is a distinct form of sentimentalism will involve demonstrating that TS is either consistent with the rejection of, or involves something in addition to, these other forms of sentimentalism. This exercise is conducted primarily in the interest of introducing and clarifying the positive commitments of an **independent TS**. That is, I aim to clarify what TS is on its own by making it clear what the transcendental sentimentalist need and need not commit to.

In the second part of this chapter, I address the question of why anyone should believe TS. I offer a brief sketch of what I take to be promising strategies for demonstrating its plausibility. Explanatorily, TS makes for an attractive position because it retains the theoretical advantages of sentimentalism while avoiding some oft-discussed implausibilities burdening other forms of sentimentalism. This is an “explanatory loveliness” argument the likes of which are common in meta-ethics. A more promising strategy for directly establishing TS involves marshaling a transcendental argument in its support. If successful, this argument would establish TS by demonstrating that *not* having a sentimental response towards x result’s in a person’s *disqualification* (in the normative sense) from counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of x.

The line of thought pursued in this chapter is mainly exploratory rather than argumentative. I do not argue in favor of TS to the exclusion of those views to which it is opposed. Each part of this exploration will touch on points of philosophical contention that it is outside the scope of this particular project to resolve. Even in my sketch of argumentative strategies, there is much that must be filled in and premises which must be

further established by the transcendental sentimentalist. The contribution I aim to make is the identification of a distinct way of conceiving the relationship between sentiment and evaluative thought and a strategy of rendering this conception plausible.

I. Non-inferential Evaluative Knowledge

Transcendental sentimentalism's explanandum is non-inferential evaluative knowledge. By "evaluative knowledge" I mean the kind of knowledge that is about the non-instrumental value of some object, action, event, or other bearer of value. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the moral value of actions, but I am optimistic about TS's ability to account for knowledge of other forms of non-instrumental value. By "non-inferential" knowledge I mean the sort of knowledge that, when it occurs, is formed immediately, without deliberation, upon the object of that knowledge being presented to an epistemic agent. A paradigmatic case of this kind of epistemic state is the knowledge sourced from perception; one doesn't normally need to consider premises in syllogistic form in an effort to deduce the color of the objects of one's visual experience. A sighted person with the capacity to experience color simply *sees* that the fire-engine is red; in the seeing of this object (under normal circumstances), they come to know that it is red non-inferentially.

In the context of value judgments, non-inferential evaluative knowledge of the moral wrongness of some act involves the coming to know that is right or wrong on the basis of seeing it occur or upon the consideration of it in conception. For instance, if I asked you to consider the act of a psychopath torturing innocents for the purposes of

experiencing momentary titillation, insofar as you are a capable moral judge, you will immediately conclude that this is an abhorrent, morally wrong act. Though there are undoubtedly moral principles on the basis of which you could infer the wrongness of this act, your immediate judgment did not result from your first considering these principles and finding an entailment governing this case. That there is such a thing as non-inferential evaluative knowledge depends on the possibility of cases like these, in which the wrongness or rightness of some act is as transparent to us as the colors of the objects in our immediate environment.³⁶

Kauppinen uses the term “judgment sentimentalism” to refer to a constellation of views according to which judgments of moral value are in some way *constituted* by emotional or sentimental responses or are *about* these responses. TS claims that the occurrence of one kind of evaluative judgment is conditioned by sentimental response. However, being conditioned by sentiment does not require being constituted by sentiment. This is true of all conditioning and constitution generally. For example, though a steak’s being medium-rare is conditioned by exposure to some heat source, this medium-rare steak is not constituted by that heat source. Insofar as sentiments are not ordinary belief-states (which I will assume without argument for this chapter), to say that moral judgments are *constituted* by sentimental responses is to commit to a type of non-cognitivism that understands the judgment “ ϕ -ing is morally wrong” as the expression of the non-cognitive attitude towards ϕ -ing which constitutes it. Transcendental Sentimentalism is plainly inconsistent with judgment sentimentalism of

³⁶ Of course the physical or mental process of acquiring these pieces of knowledge may be a difference between these cases even if the truth of what they claim is alike in transparency.

this variety because TS implies that there are judgments of value that express factive cognitive states, namely non-inferential evaluative knowledge.

This point does not foreclose upon the possibility of TS being the kind of judgment sentimentalism that takes evaluative judgments to be *about* sentimental responses. I will reject this possibility in the course of the discussion of how TS employs the term “being a necessary condition of” in part XX.

II. “Counting as having” knowledge

According to Kauppinen (forthcoming), explanatory sentimentalism is the view that “sentimental reactions fundamentally explain our moral verdicts,” and “moral judgment is deep down driven by emotion.” The work of contemporary moral psychologists who advance accounts of the etiology and mechanisms of moral thought straightforwardly fits this description. Jonathan Haidt’s model of cognitive systems, for instance, understands immediate evaluative intuitions to be caused by non-reason governed affective responses. According to Haidt’s model, the occurrence of this class of moral thought is causally explained by the sentimental states of the thinker.³⁷ Prior to the advent of empirical psychology, explanatory sentimentalism is found in the work of early modern British Sentimentalists such as Frances Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith.³⁸ Each of these thinkers advanced pictures of evaluative thought on which sentiment served as its mechanism or constituent.

³⁷ See Haidt (2001) and (2012)

³⁸ See Hutcheson (1725) and (1728), Hume (1739) and (1751), and Smith (1759).

Transcendental Sentimentalism, in holding that sentimental response is a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge, is consistent with the view that sentiments serve as a causal antecedent of moral thought. However, insofar as explanatory sentimentalism is an empirical thesis justified through *a posteriori* observation of cases of correlations between affective response and evaluation, it does not entail TS. This is for at least two reasons. The first relates to their respective scopes; TS is a claim about non-inferential evaluative knowledge, so a complete account of the necessary conditions of having an evaluative *thought* will not necessarily exhaust or account for the necessary conditions of a particular subset of that sort of thought. That is, even if the causal story about evaluative thoughts that explanatory sentimentalism offers is correct, there are plausibly further constraints on being an evaluative thought of a particular kind. Relatedly, the second reason is that insofar as TS is a thesis about what conditions evaluative *knowledge*, empirical observation is an insufficient means for discovering its necessary conditions. Consequently, the transcendental sentimentalist's work differs from that of the empirical psychologists insofar as knowledge is a category of thought the necessary conditions of which cannot be discovered using purely non-normative methods.

According to the independent transcendental sentimentalism I will present, "counting as having non-inferential knowledge" is not a physical state of a subject that is a product of a causal chain, it is a normative description of the authoritative status of the knower's reports of evaluative states of affairs. This is meant as an echo of Sellars's famous dictum from "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", "The essential point is that in

characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.” (p.169). Even if the explanatory sentimentalists were to show that every case of non-inferential evaluative knowledge was preceded by a sentimental response, this would not be evidence of TS’s truth. This is because *being an episode of knowing*, according to an independent TS, is a property that is not in the category of that which can be the product of causal forces. More clarification of this idea of knowledge will be offered in subsequent sections.

In the interest of seeing how TS requires substantiation beyond that which is appealed to by the explanatory sentimentalists, consider another example of a context in which sentiments play an explanatory role: motivated reasoning. Plausibly, a person is engaged in motivated reasoning when their desire or motivation to form a certain conclusion influences their deliberation. Cases of motivated reasoning are sometimes explained by the reasoner sincerely wanting something to be true or, alternatively, having a strong aversion to a particular conclusion. Because wantings and aversions are plausibly caused by, constituted by, or instances of sentimental response, the role of the sentiments in cases of motivated reasoning is functionally similar to the role the explanatory sentimentalists find for them in the context of moral thought. One concern of the motivated reasoning theorist, as it is with the explanatory sentimentalist, is to discover, using empirical means, the precise role that sentiments play in causing the occurrence of their target psychological explanandum. Of course, psychological investigations, like most other empirical investigations, should be informed by the conceptual distinctions and

analyses uncovered by philosophy. However, the difference between these kinds of explanations and TS is that the latter says that having sentiments or emotions about the object of evaluation is an epistemic good and necessary for evaluative *knowledge*, not merely the occurrence of thoughts about value.³⁹ Consequently, to be a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having non-inferential knowledge is to play a role in the accounting for a species of *knowing*, understood as a psychological state's positive normative status. This is a separate role from that of being a component of a model aimed at explaining the production of psychological phenomena.

This example is complicated by the fact that accusing someone of engaging in “motivated reasoning” is naturally understood as an indictment of the quality of their reasoning.⁴⁰ For a conclusion to be the product of motivated reasoning, it might be thought, is for that conclusion to count as having a *negative* normative status. A less extreme interpretation might be that a conclusion is disqualified from counting as authoritative on account of its formation being influenced by motive. According to the latter interpretation, this motivated conclusion would *lack* normative status of any kind such that it could be made relevant in the space of reasons. However, we have come to a point dialectically where little further productive discussion can be had without an explication of “normative status”.

III. Counting as having a “normative status”

³⁹ I am deliberately avoiding the claim that sentiments help “justify” evaluative beliefs or judgments for reasons that will be made clearer when I differentiate TS from epistemological sentimentalism.

⁴⁰ However, the epistemic permissibility or impermissibility of engaging in motivated reasoning is not a settled matter in normative epistemology. See e.g. Kunda (1990) for a discussion of motivated reasoning that does not entail an epistemic transgression.

In the preceding section I referred to a psychological state's positive "normative status" (in virtue of which it counts as being knowledge) in order to differentiate which of that state's conditions are accessible by empirical observation and which are not. The implication is that the normative status of a psychological state is not something which can be observed empirically nor are its conditions for counting as having this normative status. In this section I will elaborate on this point. In an effort to understand what it is for counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge to be a normative status I will discuss counting having a normative status generally.

First, it is worth flagging that I prefer to use the locution "x *counts* as having [normative status x]" (rather than "has [normative status x]" or "is [normative status x]") because it makes more explicit the role of rules and principles in its attribution. To say of something that it "counts" is to say that it is an event, object, state, or other entity that is governed by rules or principles, often of a game.⁴¹ For example, to say of a basketball going through a hoop that "it counts!" is to say that this event occurs within the scope of the rule-governed game according to which this event results in at least one point for a team. This is a *normative description*, or game-relative description, of this event, as all attributions of normative status are. The polar opposite of the description of "counting as x" is "disqualified from counting as x". To say of an event, object, or state that it "doesn't count!" is to claim that it violates the rules or occurs outside the scope of that which is governed by the rules. Imagine now a stray basketball flying in from off court and going through the hoop during our game—this event counts for nothing because this wayward

⁴¹ The analogy between knowledge-attributions and moves within a game will be pursued here because I find it immensely clarificatory, but caution is in order. The reader is promised that an explication of their disanalogies are forthcoming.

ball has no normative status in the context of our game. The ball that does count is typically called the “game-ball”. This is the object that at the beginning of the game it is agreed will be made subject to the rules governing a particular run of basketball. Pointing at this ball and saying “this is the game-ball!” is to make a normative description of it and to anoint it with its normative status.

We can think of other game-relative descriptions like “being a pawn” or “being a bishop” for a game of chess, which are normative statuses that an object can have that entails it is subject to rules which dictate how a player is allowed to move it on the chessboard. Again, the point here is that insofar as these are normative statuses, their attribution is not something that is discoverable strictly through empirical observation of the object. There is nothing about the game-ball’s causal profile that is relatively different from the non-game-ball’s such that we can find it to be the one with the normative status. The difference lies in the former’s being made subject to rules, which of course is itself an event with a causal description, but, insofar as “rules” are being invoked, demands a normative description as well. The same is true of the anointing of any normative status. That is, a (perhaps implicit) grasp of the rules of the game is necessary to understand and articulate what is meant by describing something as “counting as” having a normative status.

What sort of “game”-relative description can we offer of counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge? Here is a plausible account: to count as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of x is, in part, to be able to offer immediate authoritative judgments about the value of x upon being presented with x . If, for instance,

you have non-inferential knowledge of the moral value of a type of charitable act, you are able to offer reports of that act's value upon being presented with tokens of that act-type. Part of my recognizing you as authoritative with respect to that act-type's value is recognizing that I am licensed to infer the truth of the propositional content of your evaluative judgments about acts of that type. For lack of a better term, call these a subset of the "rules" of the space of reasons—the "game" in which we give and ask for justifications for our beliefs and actions. Your cognitive state having this normative status (i.e. being an instance of non-inferential evaluative knowledge) just is for it to be subject to these epistemic rules, and many others still. For evaluative knowledge, especially moral value, these rules also plausibly have to do with what behavioral dispositions one should form in light of their knowledge. The idea is that any person who has non-inferential evaluative knowledge really "counts" as having knowledge of this type because they not only can immediately produce a judgment but also because they are ready to act on it. Failure to form the latter dispositions is evidence of a person's lack of conviction with respect to their evaluative judgment, and we should not countenance such lack of conviction from a true non-inferential authority of evaluative matters.

The analog for the game-ball-object or pawn-object in the context of knowledge is a psychological state of the subject, understood as a natural occurrence. Though not without hesitation, I will call this a cognitive state.⁴² Just as a game-ball is a natural object with a particular normative status and a pawn is a natural object with a particular

⁴² I do not wish there to be too much read into what is meant by "cognitive state", including any implication that such a state has representational content as one of its natural properties. The most I want to say is that cognitive states have a particular subject matter. The temptation is to say that they have aboutness or intentionality, but I want to leave open the possibility that this aboutness may be reducible to some other natural property or is itself a normative status.

normative status, an episode of knowing is a natural cognitive state with a particular normative status.

We can restate TS with this idea built in:

“A necessary condition of the possibility of a natural cognitive state having the normative status of “being non-inferential evaluative knowledge” is that the person in this cognitive state also is having or has had a sentimental response towards the subject-matter of that cognitive state.”

Again, the idea is that we may be able, with empirical observation, to discover the nature of cognitive states, but we cannot through our bare observation of them alone observe when they have a normative status or the conditions of this status obtaining.

The preceding account is meant to be a workable picture of the game-relative description of the normative status of “counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge” and the natural object that takes on this status. Defending the details of this account is not my concern in this chapter; my present concern is demonstrating that this kind of account that is based on epistemic and practical principles is possible, even if its details are up for debate.

Here is the disanalogy which allows us to not regard epistemic or evaluative deliberation literally as a type of game: unlike in chess and basketball, epistemic rules or the rules of what is appropriate conduct for evaluative authorities are neither a product of convention or stipulation. Or at least, if they are, it is not obvious that they are. There is no shortage of other plausible non-epistemic normative statuses that require reference to

principles that are not obviously the product of convention or stipulation: counting as being an “innocent”, counting as “belonging” to a particular person, a relationship counting as a “friendship”, counting as being a “person”, counting as “being guilty” of a crime, etc.. None of these are uncontroversial cases, and some may be less obviously rule-relative statuses than the basketball or chess related statuses discussed above. One test for whether these kinds of cases are in fact *normative* statuses is whether the disqualification from counting as having them makes essential reference to moral, practical, or other kinds of normative principles. I will expand on this point in the section that follows.

In pointing out this disanalogy I do not want to concede too much. I believe that being a game-ball and being a chess-piece are normative statuses, literally speaking. The dimension along which they differ with the examples in the preceding paragraphs is robustness—the extent of their importance/relevance outside the context of a circumscribed game. The core of what I’ve described in this section has relevance to the notion of both robust and obviously non-robust normative statuses. Apropos of this point and in the interest of tying it back to the overarching purpose of this section, consider William DeVries’s elucidation of Sellars’s position on attributions of knowledge and concept-possession. If what I have said is correct, DeVries’s point here applies to all attributions of normative status:

“Such descriptions presume a background of rules that define and constitute the positions, objects and moves concerned. In none of these cases is the game-relative description analysable into or reducible to a description that makes

no reference to the rules of the game: having a bishop is not analysable into or reducible to having a certain physical relation to an object of a certain physical kind.” (2005, p. 131)

Transcendental Sentimentalism is not explanatory sentimentalism for the reason expressed here.⁴³ Its articulation is tied up with the normative principles/constraints governing attributions of non-inferential evaluative knowledge.

IV. A “necessary condition of the possibility of” counting as...

I have claimed that according to TS sentimental response is a necessary condition of non-inferential evaluative knowledge in a way that’s distinct from its being a causal condition. For all the talk in the previous section about knowledge and its positive normative character it might be suspected that, on TS, sentiments are an *epistemic* condition, i.e. a condition of the *justification* of our non-inferential evaluative knowledge. This is not necessarily the case. Epistemological sentimentalists, again following Kauppinen’s terminology, “believe that moral justification bottoms out in sentimental response of a certain kind” (2014, p. 4). For these theorists,⁴⁴ having an emotion is not to be gripped by an irrational episode or to merely feel a certain way; emotions are means of experiencing aspects of the world which may be inaccessible via ordinary perception. As experiences,⁴⁵ they confer justification upon beliefs that are formed on the basis of what

⁴³ DeVries makes a stronger claim than the transcendental sentimentalist needs to make in rejecting the *reducibility* of normative description along with its non-analyzability into non game-relative description. The transcendental sentimentalist can remain agnostic about the synthetic reducibility of norms.

⁴⁴ See Prinz (2004), (2007); Goldie (2007); Roeser (2011); Tappolet (2011), (2016); and Kauppinen (2013).

⁴⁵ Depending on the epistemic sentimentalist, these emotional “experiences” are cached out either as literal perception, on analogy with perception, or non-perceptual intuitions. I use the neutral term “experience” to cover all of these possible cases.

they represent. To be in a state of anger towards a token act ϕ , for instance, is to experience ϕ as having the property of being outrageous—a belief that this ϕ -ing is outrageous is thus prima facie justified on the basis of having this anger-experience. The analogous case is that my belief that the fire engine is red is prima facie justified on the basis of having a perception of the redness of the fire-engine. Of course, a hurdle for epistemic sentimentalists is to specify under what conditions emotions accurately represent, as it is not difficult to come up with cases in which someone's anger seems to be inappropriate because the object of their anger is not, in fact, outrageous. Count my (pre-caffeinated) feelings about morning traffic among these kinds of cases.

Transcendental sentimentalism is likely entailed by many forms of epistemological sentimentalism. That is, insofar as “being justified” is a property that all forms of knowledge essentially have, the epistemological sentimentalist will likely concur that justification-conferring sentiments are “necessary conditions of the possibility of” some evaluative knowledge. However, I believe the most plausible form of TS is held independently of, and accompanied by a rejection of, any justification-conferring role for sentiments. This is a difference from independent TS's relationship to explanatory sentimentalism, a position with which it could align itself without theoretical cost. On independent TS, sentiments are not the sources of moral knowledge; they are psychological states which lack the epistemic power to confer justification. A consequence of this is that according to TS it is not a legitimate justification of a moral belief to make an avowal of one's emotional state. For TS, this is not necessarily because emotions lack the proper propositional structure to serve as premises, but because they are irrelevant to the

justificatory task. Such a view coheres with intuitive thoughts like, “Irrespective of how I might feel about the matter at hand, I should believe that murder is wrong and that it is wrong for me to murder.”

So far I have said that according to TS sentiments do more than serve as causal antecedents of evaluative thought, emphasizing their role in conditioning the normative status of counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge. I claimed this on the grounds that counting as having knowledge is a state of a subject that is not the effect of a causal chain of events, but rather a normative status that is not the subject-matter of empirical description. I have also said that, according to TS, sentiments need not play the normative role found for them by epistemic sentimentalists—that of conferring justification upon evaluative beliefs. What, then, is it for sentiments to be necessary conditions of the possibility of a kind of knowledge in a way distinct from that of a cause and that of a justification-conferring mental state?

The answer, too simply put, is that the sentiments’ role is that of a **transcendental condition**—i.e. a condition that figures into an *a priori* explanation of the possibility of a conditioned phenomena. Importantly, transcendental conditions are discoverable via armchair reasoning that takes the conditioned as given and seeks to establish what is necessary for it to obtain. In the final section of this chapter, I sketch a transcendental argument with this form aimed at establishing transcendental sentimentalism. In what immediately follows I illustrate the general nature of transcendental conditions by

example, relying on ground already covered by focusing on transcendental conditions of counting as having certain normative statuses.

In the previous section I suggested that having knowledge was like being a pawn in a game of chess and like being the game-ball in a game of basketball. I claimed that these statuses were similar insofar as their attribution involves regarding whatever has that status as being subject to or being governed by some set of rules or principles—i.e. they are all alike in being normative statuses. However, there is another similarity among all these cases: there are necessary conditions of the possibility of counting as having these normative statuses. For an object to count as being a game-ball in basketball, it is necessary that this object is manipulable, that it has a circumference that is less than that of the game-hoops, that it is made of solid material etc.. Having the status of being the game-ball entails the possibility of being made subject to the rules of the game by its players. What I just enumerated are some of the physical conditions that must obtain for a natural object to be made subject to the rules of basketball. The point is that the object couldn't have been made subject to the rules of basketball had the ball been 80 inches in circumference and made of molasses. Similarly, the necessary conditions for a natural object to possibly count as a pawn in a game of chess, this object must be smaller than the individual tiles on the chess board, it must be moveable relative to the board and the other pieces, etc.. If the object was larger than the chess board, its position in the game would be indeterminate, making it impossible for the rule-relative description of “being a pawn” to apply to it in a game of chess. These are transcendental conditions.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ It might be wondered: if transcendental conditions are all physical conditions, the kind which can be observed in the object with normative status, why isn't the discovery of these transcendental conditions just a matter of ordinary empirical investigation? So construed, transcendental sentimentalism would collapse back

As we will see in the transcendental argument I sketch later in this chapter, counterfactuals are necessary for determining and articulating transcendental conditions. Were the ball or chess piece too big, no basketball or chess could be played, for example. However, like in the case of explicating “normative status”, these game examples are limited by the fact that they are determined by convention or stipulation. Luckily, there

into a type of explanatory sentimentalism. The discovery of transcendental conditions can result from empirical observation, but importantly, it is not *necessary* that their discovery occurs in this way. Insofar as we can articulate the rules of a game, we can discover the transcendental conditions of objects counting as having a normative status in the context of that game. Imagine a game I am making up right now involving two trees and two people with one rope each. Each person is assigned a tree and the goal of this game is to be the first to tie the rope to the top branch of each tree, starting with the tree they are assigned. A transcendental condition of the possibility of a tree counting as a “game-tree” in this game is that it is climbable, for if it weren’t the game couldn’t be played. We’re able to discover this condition by considering *in conception* the conditions necessary for this game’s components to count in the game. This act of conception is possible because we are able to stipulate the rules of the game that make it possible for someone to play.

Plausibly, games which are played according to conventional rules are discoverable by empirical observation. If you watched enough games of basketball, you could come to articulate these rules on the basis of this observation. This is possible because, plausibly, conventional rules are nothing over and above conditioned agreement on which behavior is sanctioned or prohibited in particular contexts. But these rules also exist in rule books for our consideration, and it is not necessarily by observation that these written rules are articulable.

The transcendental conditions of non-inferential evaluative knowledge are discoverable by us insofar as we are able to apprehend the epistemic rules governing the space of reasons. However, this act of apprehending epistemic rules is different from our choosing their content or observing patterns of human behavior. That is, these rules are neither stipulated nor mere conventions, or at least it would be a surprise to learn that they are given that we treat them differently from rules which are uncontroversially stipulated or conventional. We do not permit individuals to stipulate their own rules of rationality, nor should we think that epistemic principles are empirical generalizations of observed behavior. In support of this latter point, consider that an idea that is perfectly comprehensible is one of living in possible world in which circumstances are such that vast majority of people exhibit deliberative behavior that is prohibited by the principles of rationality (in fact, some of us may suspect we are currently living in a world quite like this).

Despite its being grounded in the apprehension of rules not discoverable by observation, transcendental sentimentalism can cohere with and productively learn from an empirical investigation into sentimental response. This is true for all transcendental conditions. For example, I claimed that there was a transcendental condition of “manipulability” upon counting as a game-ball in basketball. Absent any further empirical investigation into the physical nature of manipulability, we would know very little about the transcendental conditions of being a game-ball, other than perhaps what a thinly articulated functional property can reveal on its own. If the claim of the transcendental sentimentalist is correct, there is plenty they can learn about the nature of the transcendental condition of non-inferential evaluative knowledge from empirical psychology. This is because, like manipulability, sentimental response is a natural occurrence, presumably with an evolutionary origin and a particular physical manifestation. However, that sentimental response is a transcendental condition is discoverable only by considering the rules constitutive of the space of reasons that determine the normative status of cognitive states. The apprehension of these rules is not made possible by observation, nor by stipulation, but by normative deliberation.

are less artificial examples to be mined. Consider the normative status of counting as a friend or a relationship counting as a friendship. Insofar as you are willing to grant me that there are principles governing friendship and there is such a thing as being normatively disqualified from being a friend to someone, it is sensible to ask what the transcendental conditions of counting as a friend are. Importantly, this is not the same as asking what the principles of friendship are or about the rules for how to be a good friend.⁴⁷ You may have no trouble knowing who your friends are and know when to strip someone of that status when they've wronged you, but it is a separate task entirely to specify precisely what transcendental conditions must obtain for friendship to occur.

Luckily, friendship was a target of inquiry for one of our greatest philosophers. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that “friendship”⁴⁸ is, among other things, about the mutual recognition of the feeling of good will between two parties. On the basis of this observation and previous argumentation he says, “We conclude, therefore, that to be friends men must have good will for one another, must each wish for the good of the other... and must each be aware of one another’s good will.” (1156a4-5). Questions of interpretation inevitably arise when reading Aristotle, but a natural interpretation of this passage is that Aristotle is making explicit for us some (or perhaps the complete set) of the principles governing relationships that count as friendships. We might quibble with Aristotle on the details of his explication, but the point here is that it is not obvious that he is conveying the rules of application for an merely conventional term or his own term of

⁴⁷ Like with many normative statuses, the principles or rules governing friendship are normally, at best, implicitly understood by the parties involved.

⁴⁸ There is some question as to whether “friend” or “friendship” in Aristotle’s use is the same as our contemporary concept of “friend”. I take the concepts to be sufficiently similar to work as an example in this context. (See Kraut 2018 for discussion)

art. In the course of his discussion on friends, he seems to think something of real value is at stake, and that it is worth getting clear on it.

On the basis of Aristotle's explication, we can easily reconstruct some of what he might take to be the transcendental conditions of counting as being a friend to someone: each party in this relationship must have the capacity for good will and must have the capacity to be aware of other's good will towards them. Having both of these capacities is a necessary condition for the possibility of counting as a friend. If I lacked one of these capacities, or if I lost these capacities, I would be disqualified from counting as a friend. This is not a simple restatement of Aristotle's principles of friendship; what is introduced in these transcendental conditions is the (admittedly thin) notion of "capacity" and the necessity of their obtaining. Of course, the more we discover about the psychological (i.e. causal) conditions of the human possession of these capacities, the better we can articulate the nature of friendship's transcendental conditions. In lieu of "the capacity for good will" and "the capacity to be aware of other's good will towards them" we might substitute a more psychologically-informed rendering like "a capacity for emotional intelligence." **The *transcendentality* of these conditions lies in the *a priori* nature of their initial discovery as necessary for the counting as having a normative status.** Their discovery depended on Aristotle's articulation of the principles of friendship that determine its genuine instances, not on the observation of psychological or sociological states of affairs. We could have put every self-reported "friendship" and the person's involved under the figurative microscope and still never have arrived at friendships'

transcendental conditions if we had no grasp of the normative nature of this kind of relationship, i.e. if we had no grasp of the rules which govern the “friendship-game.”

Again, the adequacy of Aristotle’s account of friendship is not at issue. The point is that his principles of friendship appear to have a more robust standing than the rules of basketball or chess. Consequently, friendship itself does not seem to have importance only in the context of playing a game. However, like the rules of basketball and chess, on the basis of its principles we can uncover the transcendental conditions of the possibility of a relationship having this normative status.

For the transcendental sentimentalist the manipulability of the ball, the relative size of the chess-piece, and the capacity for emotional intelligence are all analogs for having a sentimental response. That is, without having a sentimental response towards some object, a person could not count as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of that object. The former is a transcendental condition of the latter if TS is 1) true and 2) discoverable from the armchair on the basis of a grasp of some of the epistemic and practical principles governing attributions of non-inferential evaluative knowledge. Again, these principles have to do with how the game of attributing and justifying non-inferential evaluative knowledge should be played. For knowledge generally, these principles have to do with what we are licensed to infer and the justifications the knower is expected to be able to offer. For evaluative knowledge these principles also plausibly have to do with what behavioral dispositions one should form in light of their non-inferential judgment.

V. A “necessary” condition...

For the transcendental sentimentalist, in what sense are these conditions “necessary”? On a kind of view like independent TS, a normative status like “being the game-ball” is not *analyzable* in terms of its transcendental conditions. Put another way, the transcendental conditions of counting as having a normative status are not *definitionally* necessary. Evidence of this is garnered by a simple test of conceptual confusion through contradiction. The claim “a game-ball in basketball must be manipulable and its circumference must fall within a certain range relative to the size of the hoop” is a proposition the denial of which does not commit one to an obvious logical contradiction. Alternatively, consider the assertion, “Bob’s ball is this game’s game-ball but it’s not the ball we’ll be playing with during this game.” This claim involves the negation of the truism (albeit a conventional one) that a game-ball is the object that is played with in a game of basketball. Anyone, like our assertor, who sincerely makes a claim committed to the negation of this truism is apparently *conceptually* confused, just as they are if they assert “It was courageous for the sun to rise this morning” or “Redness has three edges but blueness has two.” Someone who sincerely makes a claim committed to the negation of a statement of the *transcendental* conditions of being a game-ball is surely incorrect, and if I am right this incorrectness is demonstrable using a priori argument, but they are not obviously committed to a *logical* or *conceptual* error.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ For these reasons, transcendental sentimentalism is not the kind of judgment sentimentalism which commits to an analytic reduction of evaluative thought/judgment to sentimental response. This type of view, unlike non-cognitivism, may be made consistent with TS. For instance, neo-sentimentalist and fitting-attitude theories of value claim that judgments of what is of positive value are analyzable in terms of the appropriateness of pro-attitudes towards the bearer of value. For instance, to judge of something that it is desirable is to judge that it is appropriate or fitting for someone to desire it. Depending on the view, the non-inferential knowledge of what is an appropriate object of our attitudes may logically entail the occurrence of a sentimental response towards that object (i.e. TS). Other analytic reduction programmes include those which claim that evaluative beliefs or sentences make reference to actual sentimental responses

Insofar as there are transcendental conditions that are discoverable on the basis of stipulated or conventional rules, the necessity involved in transcendental claims is not always of an absolute or “for-all-time” variety. If the epistemic, practical, and evaluative principles governing counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge were absolute, then this would plausibly render their transcendental conditions absolutely necessary. Also relevant is the subject-matter of evaluative knowledge; if instances of having value were objective, absolute, and timeless, this would further constrain the conditions under which we could know them. However, the metaphysical status of these principles or value itself is not of present concern;⁵⁰ I have only suggested that they may be disanalogous with game-rules in virtue of being not *obviously* the product of convention or stipulation.

Transcendental claims of necessary conditions of possibility are *necessary* simply in virtue of being expressions of what *must* obtain for a conditioned object to count as having

of the evaluator or the sentimental response of an ideal judge. Transcendental sentimentalism is distinct from both of these camps.

These analyses of value are controversial. Happily, defending an analysis of value need not burden an independent TS. As an aside, I will mention that on the view I prefer, the thin concepts of “good” and “bad”, as well as the evaluative component of thick concepts (e.g. “courageous” and “cowardly”), resist analysis into other concepts, even though the non-inferential knowings whose content they figure in have numerous conditions, including sentimental response. However, the proper analysis of these terms is simply orthogonal to the claim that sentimental response conditions the possibility of a subject counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge.

⁵⁰ Because this is not something that needs to be addressed in the course of articulating TS, TS is distinct from metaphysical sentimentalism. Whereas certain forms of judgment sentimentalism advance claims about the reducibility of value-concepts, metaphysical sentimentalists advance claims about the reducibility of value-properties. According to these theorists, facts about value are nothing over and above facts about sentimental responses. While many sentimentalists offer a package view about the conceptual and metaphysical reducibility of value to sentiment, they are logically distinct theses. Even if value isn’t analyzable in terms of sentimental responses, its metaphysical constitution may be such that a synthetic reduction of the former to the latter is correct. An example of this type of view is Prinz’s speaker subjectivism, on which an action is morally wrong “just in case there is an observer who has a sentiment of disapprobation toward it.” (2007, p. 92). Other metaphysical sentimentalists believe that value is grounded in sentiments that are not always actual but which are possible under ideal conditions.

the status it has. Because I have said they are not definitionally true these claims are plausibly categorized as “synthetic” judgments. Because their truth is discoverable from the armchair and this discovery relies on a grasp of rules or principles that are not detectable via empirical observation, these claims are plausibly categorized as *a priori* judgments. Whether these synthetic a priori judgments are all relative to our communal or historical perspective is a question for another day.⁵¹

VI. Argumentative Strategies

Even if all that has been said so far is coherent, an obvious unanswered question remains: why think that *sentimental response* is a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge? In this section I will sketch two argumentative strategies aimed at establishing TS. The first of which will rely on the explanatory attractiveness of TS. The second of which will be a form of transcendental argument aimed at proving TS directly.

VI.i Explanatory Attractiveness

I began this chapter by stating that the interesting philosophical work of sentimentalism lies in its specifying the explanatory relationship between sentiments and evaluative thought. The variety of sentimentalisms mentioned so far represents the variety of possible ways of conceiving this relationship. The relative explanatory attractiveness of each of these variants can be measured against each other by comparing and weighing how

⁵¹ I suspect they are not.

much they explain vs. the implausibility of their consequences. By giving each position credit for the former and docking them credit for the latter, we may calculate at what David Enoch has termed the “plausibility points” of each.⁵²

Generating a full ledger of the plausibility points of every sentimentalism is a task for a longer work, but surveying oft-discussed attractions and implausibilities of each variant suggests that TS acquits itself well by comparison. Like explanatory sentimentalism, TS can easily make sense of the close relationship between motivation and disposition to make moral judgments. It can also explain moral development and moral expertise in terms of the proper conditioning of our sentimental responses. Insofar as there is qualitative “what-it’s-likeness” associated with sentiment, TS can also account for the phenomenology of deeply-felt evaluation. The ability to cohere with plausible evolutionary etiologies of our evaluative tendencies also numbers among TS’s attractions.

As discussed above, because TS is a distinct form of sentimentalism it need not require an expressivist semantics of evaluative judgments, need not require emotion to be epistemically on a par with perception, nor does it entail that moral judgments are merely subjectively true. It is the task of sentimentalist theorists to convince us that the perceived implausibility of each of the requirements of their respective position is not dispositive of its falsity. Though each requirement may end up proving true, absent any decisive proof, they cost the plausibility of the sentimentalisms of which they are a consequence. This cost of plausibility points must be made up for by each sentimentalism’s ability to productively explain evaluative phenomena. The conclusion of this form of argument is clear: TS,

⁵² Enoch (2011)

unburdened by such requirements, and capable of explaining what sentimentalism sets out to explain, is clearly in the black with respect to plausibility points relative to its sentimentalist competitors.

A complete argument of this variety would have to account for TS's implausibilities, of which there are potentially many. It would also have to reckon with the defenses offered by sentimentalists of the supposed implausibilities mentioned above. Still, I hope this brief discussion is indicative of the viability of this strategy in making the case for TS's truth.

VI.ii Transcendental Argument

A potentially more satisfying approach involves a transcendental argument aimed directly at establishing TS. Transcendental proofs are many different things to many different philosophers, but what is generally agreed upon is that they begin with a given phenomenon and attempt to derive conclusions about what conditions that phenomenon, commonly to an anti-skeptical end. In the case of TS, what is conditioned is non-inferential evaluative knowledge. For a transcendental argument like TS to get off the ground, the transcendental sentimentalist needs to have convinced us that this kind of knowledge is possible. Once this common ground is agreed to, the next task is establishing that sentimental response is necessary for it to actually obtain. This argument will not have the same anti-skeptical stakes as the classic transcendental proofs that are familiar from Kant or Korsgaard, but plausible reconstructions of the latter should share this argument's formal characteristics.

Drawing conclusions about necessary conditions for the possibility of counting as having a normative status is, if my previous examples work, a relatively intuitive task in many cases. Much of the preceding discussion relied on the fact that we have an implicit understanding of the transcendental conditions of counting as having a normative status in the context of games. My recommendation is to look to these examples once more in an attempt to make explicit what kind of implicit reasoning we are engaging in when we intuit these transcendental conditions. I claimed that a transcendental condition of the possibility of counting as a pawn in a chess game was that this piece was both moveable and smaller than the individual tiles on the chess board—in virtue of what is this claim correct? It's tempting to say “things just have to be that way for pawns!”, but while perhaps a viable retort in the context of setting up a game of chess, this is not a suitable premise for inclusion in an argument, since this would just be a restatement of the necessity that is in question. A way forward is revealed by asking “What would the situation look like if these conditions did not obtain?”. The answer for a would-be pawn is that it would be a large immovable object that takes up more than one tile of the chess board. Such an object, were we to try to treat it as if it were a pawn, would render the game unplayable. That is, it would make it impossible for the rules of chess to be followed. Insofar as this piece violates the rules of chess or, more accurately, cannot be made subject to its rules for how a pawn should behave, it is disqualified from counting as a pawn.

It is this notion of disqualification that should be employed in the transcendental argument aimed at establishing TS. An understanding of cases of disqualification from counting as having a normative status can be drawn on in an attempt to formulate

conditions under which such disqualifications are prevented. The complete set of the necessary conditions under which all disqualifications from having a normative status are prevented turn out to be the complete set of transcendental conditions of counting as having that normative status. This idea is made up of a number of moving parts which deserve careful tracking:

a_n: A case in which an object is disqualified from having the normative status *N*. (E.g. the case in which the would-be pawn is bigger than the chessboard tiles).

A: The complete set of cases in which an object is disqualified from having the normative status *N*. (E.g. all the possible ways in which a would-be pawn can be disqualified from counting as a pawn).

b_n: The condition under which the particular case of disqualification a_n is prevented. (E.g. the condition of the pawn-object being smaller than the individual tiles on the chessboard).

B: The complete set of conditions that, when obtaining together, prevent all of the disqualification cases in A from obtaining. (E.g. all of the conditions relating to the pawn-object that are necessary for it to be prevented from being disqualified from counting as a pawn).

B is the complete set of transcendental conditions for counting as having the normative status *N*. This complete set is potentially infinite, given that there are potentially infinite ways in which an object can be disqualified from counting as having a normative status. Happily, enumerating a complete set of transcendental conditions is not our goal, nor is it clear why anyone should have that goal. The important point is that it is necessary that b_n is a member of **B**. Let c_n be a condition that is not a member of **B**. It would be unnecessary that the c_n obtain for an object to count as having the normative status *N* because c_n 's obtaining does not prevent any cases of disqualification. An example of this kind of condition in our chess example is the condition of the pawn-object being made of wood. This is not a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as being a pawn in a game of chess—according to the argument-form I'm suggesting, this is because *not* having been made of wood would not have disqualified this object from counting as a pawn.

Applying this strategy to TS requires being able to answer the following question: when are we disqualified from counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of *x*? Producing an answer to this question will rely on our (sometimes implicit) grasp of epistemic principles. Let “*x*” stand for some existing object. One plausible entailment of epistemic principles is that when a person is completely unaware of *x*, it is impossible for them to have knowledge of any of *x*'s properties. Therefore, unawareness of *x* is disqualifying of counting as having knowledge of *x*'s properties. That is, even if they somehow guessed right about them, this unaware person cannot possibly be a reliable authority on the matter of *x*'s properties. For this disqualification to have been prevented,

this person's awareness of x must have obtained. Using the terminology of the philosophy of mind, this awareness is plausibly constituted by a person being in a cognitive state which has the subject-matter "x". Our conclusion is thus that being in a cognitive state with the subject-matter "x" is a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having knowledge of x.

Of course, mere awareness is not *sufficient* for counting as having knowledge.

After all, there is no shortage of cases in which a person believes or is aware of something but should not be treated as an authority on it. I have previously implied that *knowing* is to be in a state conditioned by this awareness (i.e. to be in the cognitive state which constitutes it) and for this state to count as having a certain normative status. Analogously, *being a pawn* is to be an object that is moveable and of a certain size and for this object to count as having a certain normative status.

This case may sound trivial, but the point is to take note of its form which may be of use in the context of an argument for the necessary conditions of the possibility of non-inferential evaluative knowledge. I suggest that this useable form of transcendental argument is as follows:

- 1) Non-inferential evaluative knowledge is possible.
- 2) For a person to have knowledge of any kind is for them to be in a cognitive state with a certain normative status.
- 3) For a person to have non-inferential evaluative knowledge is for them to be in a cognitive state with a certain normative status.

- 4) There is a set of possible cases "A": for each member of A " a_n ", a_n obtaining is sufficient for a cognitive state's disqualification from counting as non-inferential evaluative knowledge.
- 5) a_1 is one such member of A: it is the case in which a person is disqualified from counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge of x because they do not form or reinforce any approbative or aversive dispositions upon being presented with x. (In other words, they are unmoved by x).
- 6) b_1 is the condition under which disqualifying case a_1 is prevented from obtaining. This is the condition that a person has or has had a sentimental response to x.
- 7) It is necessary that b_1 obtain for it to be the case that no member of A obtains.
- 8) b_1 is a necessary condition of the possibility of non-inferential evaluative knowledge.

Consider the following concrete case that tracks this line of reasoning: Sam cannot count as having non-inferential knowledge of the wrongness of stealing, for if he did, he would have formed the disposition to not steal the pie when faced with the temptation to steal it. We can stipulate that the evidence is decisive that he did not form such a disposition because he, in fact, stole the pie under conditions that would not have prevented this disposition from actualizing. This lack of knowledge must be explainable in some way by the occurrence of a condition that disqualified him from being a non-inferential knower with respect to the wrongness of pie-stealing. It is explainable by the fact that Sam lacks the

proper conditioning to have a negative sentimental response to his intention to steal the pie. Not having a negative sentimental response disqualified Sam from counting as a non-inferential authority on the wrongness of pie-stealing and explains Sam's knowledge deficit. Having a negative sentimental response is a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having non-inferential knowledge of the rightness and wrongness of pie-stealing. That is, this necessary condition obtaining (the sentimental response) is the means by which Sam could have been prevented from being disqualified from counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge.

That this section is only a sketch of this transcendental proof is a consequence of this chapter's being largely exploratory rather than argumentative. For this proof to work, the transcendental sentimentalist must not only *explicate* each part of their position, as I have done in the first part of this chapter, they must *argue* for it. That such argument is necessary is evident from the controversial nature of many of the premises presented above. Premise 1 will be resisted by rationalists who reject intuitionism about value. Premise 2 will be resisted by those who think we can offer purely empirical descriptions of states of knowledge. Premise 5 will need to be established on the basis of the epistemic and practical principles governing non-inferential evaluative knowledge—debates over internalism and externalism about moral motivation will have application here.

The contributions that I hope to have made are 1) the illustration that this way of conceiving the explanatory relationship between sentiments and evaluation is distinct from other sentimentalisms on offer, i.e. the illustration of an independent TS; and 2) the

demonstration that this transcendental sentimentalism should be treated as plausible in virtue of the fact that there are two promising lines of argument that could be marshaled in its favor.

Chapter 7: Transcendental Sentimentalism for the Meta-Ethical Minimalist

Introduction

There are two primary purposes of this concluding chapter: first, I will draw upon the arguments made in the previous chapters in order to present a positive account of evaluation that is consistent with metaethical minimalism. In so doing, I aim to show how each commitment of metaethical minimalism I have identified can work together in the interest of showcasing not only what metaethics should *not* be concerned about but what positive philosophical contributions a metaethics scrubbed free of moral truthmakers can make. The model of evaluation that follows will be a transcendental sentimentalist one—i.e. one that takes sentiments to be a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge. As indicated in the previous chapter, transcendental sentimentalism is a position which is capable of standing apart not only from other forms of sentimentalism, but also from metaethical minimalism. However, a beneficial consequence of marrying transcendental sentimentalism with metaethical minimalism is that the former's conception of "sentiment" can become more developed. Though first I will show how the explanatory demands placed on metaethical minimalism by the epistemic condition can be met by appealing to sentiment. The result of this coupling is a pair of positions that become stronger in virtue of being packaged together.

Simultaneous to presenting a model of evaluation, this chapter will also function as a summary of the substantive elements of metaethical minimalism as it is developed and defended in this dissertation. Throughout this work, I have been careful to isolate components of metaethical minimalism and argue in favor of them in a piece-meal fashion. I stand by this approach as the best way to get clear on the plausible building blocks of metaethical minimalism, but it admittedly makes it difficult to evaluate the position as a whole. This final chapter represents an opportunity to step back and attend to the holistic vision of maintaining the possibility of moral truth without truthmakers coupled with all the consequences of that stance found in what precedes. The psychological venue playing host to the epistemological aspects of this vision is our faculty for sentiment. What follows is by no means a complete and perfect picture; however, my position is that we can learn something about the minimalist position on the basis of this incomplete account that we could not if we only consider the conclusions of each of the arguments of the preceding chapters in isolation.

I. Finding a Place for Sentiment in Metaethical Minimalism

A natural question one might have about metaethical minimalism is whether we have any distinctly *metaethical* need for appealing to sentiment. Of course, there are first-order questions about the appropriate sentiments we ought to feel towards particular persons, objects, or states of affairs. But this is not in the purview of metaethics. Additionally, it may be a contingent fact about human beings that we are better off developing dispositions to feel strong sentiments towards morally relevant features of persons, objects, or states of affairs. Perhaps this may be for no other reason than it is not

prudent to place too much trust in our capacity to quickly come to the right moral conclusion upon a sober consideration of the relevant moral principles. However, this also is not a metaethical conclusion, but a first-order practical assessment of a psychological state of affairs most likely to benefit us. Furthermore, because metaethical minimalism finds no need for truthmakers for moral truths, a metaphysical reduction of value to occurrent or dispositional sentiment is certainly off the table.

If there is a role for sentiment in the metaethical minimalist's picture, it is one that allows the minimalist to flesh out or answer a lingering question about their account. One such question for the minimalist falls out of the Chapter 5 discussion of the Epistemic Condition on reality/existence. Therein, I suggested that the metaethical minimalist should not regard causal efficacy as the mark of what is a real/existent object, but instead point to the presence of a particular condition on the possibility of non-inferential knowledge of that object being had by an epistemic agent: that the object be presented conception-independently to that epistemic agent. In articulating this position, I contrasted the kind of non-inferential knowledge we have of real objects with the kind of non-inferential knowledge we have of matters of value; in the case of the latter, such knowledge can come on the basis of *either* a conception-independent or in-conception presentation of the value-bearing object, action, or state of affairs. The lingering question for the minimalist is this: what can we say about how it is possible for epistemic agents with our particular constitution to have non-inferential knowledge of value, especially if this knowledge is not dependent upon a causal relation with real objects in the world? That is, how does the possibility of an object-presentation which is either

conception-independent or in-conception link up with a plausible story about human psychology?

The reason why this question is particularly challenging for metaethical minimalists is that they cannot appeal to the psychology of perception for their answer. Perception is an inherently conception-independent form of object-presentation, so it can at best explain only a portion of cases of non-inferential evaluative knowledge—those which occur on the basis of a conception-independent presentation of the bearer of value. It is telling of a person's conceptual confusion for them to imply that they had a perception of an object, but they have had no direct acquaintance with it outside of their imagination. At the same time, so long as I have a full grasp of the facts of the Battle of Thermopylae, there is no barrier to my forming non-inferential evaluative knowledge of the courage of its combatants. This is just as I have no problem forming such evaluations of grotesque historical acts of genocide—my inability to perceive such events should not prevent me from immediately seeing (using an analogical sense of “see”) that they are wrong. In order to explain the instances of non-inferential evaluative knowledge which occur on the basis of an in-conception presentation of the object, some other mechanism must be appealed to. In the interest of marshaling a coherent explanation, the metaethical minimalist should find what is shared between all potential cases of non-inferential evaluative knowledge; that is, they should look for a presentation-involving psychological process that can plausibly condition non-inferential knowledge irrespective of whether the object of evaluation is presented conception-independently or in-conception.

At this point, it should be no surprise that my contention is that sentiment fits this bill exactly—but it is important to understand why this is so. This explanatory fit is grounded in a perfectly ordinary fact about our psychology: sentiments and emotional responses are the sorts of psychological states we have in response to objects, persons, states of affairs, and events present both in-conception and conception-independently. There are at least two components of this fact that are relevant to the metaethical minimalist's question posed above: 1) we have sentimental responses about all the categories of things about which we make non-inferential evaluations—objects, acts, persons, states of affairs, events, etc.; and 2) our sentimental responses occur, like non-inferential judgments, on the basis of considering their object either conception-independently or in-conception. That is, one may be disposed to feel sad about their pet being put down both whether they see it in person, when they remember it happening, or when they imagine what it would be like if it were to happen. The first of these cases is presented conception-independently and the second and third are presentations of the event in-conception. While I do not intend to provide a theory of sentiment, it seems to be a constraint on any successful such theory that it takes into account the tendency of its explanans to occur in the absence of any *real* version of its object. While sentiments on the basis of in-conception presentations may be, on average, less intense than those felt on the basis of conception-independent presentations, this does not appear to discount the former variety's authenticity or validity. After all, the intensity of sentimental responses felt on the basis of conception-independent presentations may vary between subjects, but we don't take my

relatively low-intensity anger to be any less of an instance of anger just because you may be experiencing a very high-intensity version of the sentiment in reaction to the same object.

If the preceding account of sentiment is adequate, then sentiments fit nicely in the metaethical minimalist's explanation of the possibility of the kind of non-inferential evaluation that is implied by the epistemic condition. However, it is the role of sentiment in *transcendental* sentimentalism that is of particular help to the metaethical minimalist. This is due to a number of factors: First, it is to the metaethical minimalist's advantage if they find a fit between sentiment and the conditions of non-inferential evaluative judgment that doesn't rely solely on empirical findings. This is for some of the same reasons that made transcendental sentimentalism attractive as an a priori thesis in the first place; it helps make sense of what conditions a particular kind of *knowledge* while acknowledging that having knowledge is not to merely have a particular causal profile or description. This is of particular importance for the minimalist; if it is the case that it is possible to have knowledge of moral truths absent any truthmakers, then 'having knowledge' must involve something other than being in the right causal relation with a truthmaker. Consequently, the metaethical minimalist is helped by the transcendental sentimentalist conception of having knowledge as being a *normative status* instead of an empirical description. If having knowledge is a normative status, i.e. a state determined by the rules of a 'game', then there is no obvious requirement that there be truthmakers present to causally condition gaining this status. The minimalist wants to say "whatever it is that causes sentimental response, it is not a causal reaction to the existence of a moral truthmaker"; transcendental sentimentalism gives them the vocabulary to say this and

simultaneously hold that they make a difference to non-inferential knowledge of moral value.

This is because there are *transcendental* conditions on qualifying as “having non-inferential evaluative knowledge”, as was detailed in the preceding chapter. The metaethical minimalist can take sentiments’ role to be transcendental in their allowing for the possibility of non-inferential evaluative knowledge on the basis of either an in-conception or conception-independent presentation of the object of evaluation. Following the transcendental argument-structure outlined in chapter 6, the minimalist could argue that absent a sentiment preceding or accompanying a presentation of the object of evaluation, a person cannot have an objectual presentation necessary for counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge. In other words, “having non-inferential knowledge about value requires having a sentiment” is true not because of a causal connection between the two, but because the occurrence of the latter involves an in-conception and/or conception-independent presentation of the object of knowledge. And bereft of a presentation (which may be of either kind) of the object of knowledge, a person is *disqualified* (in the normative sense) from counting as having non-inferential knowledge of that object. Again, this last fact points us to *sentiment* rather than any other presentation-involving psychological state. This is because of the required permissivity of the sort of presentation we may have about the object of non-inferential evaluative knowledge—it can occur in-conception and/or conception-independently. Using transcendental sentimentalism, the metaethical minimalist can answer the lingering

explanatory question left over from the epistemic condition without opening up another potential line of attack on their minimalism.

II. What Transcendental Sentimentalism gains from Metaethical Minimalism

I have argued that metaethical minimalism is made stronger by pairing it with transcendental sentimentalism. In this section I aim to show that the reverse is true as well. The goal of the preceding chapter was to offer an independent account of a distinctive form of sentimentalism—one that found for sentiment a role in philosophical explanation but did so on the basis of an a priori transcendental argument. One consequence of taking a transcendental approach is that whatever is doing the conditioning (in this case, sentiment) is defined/understood entirely in its relation to the conditioned (non-inferential evaluative knowledge). That is, the transcendental sentimentalist, in not relying on empirical observation, can only include in their account of the phenomenon of sentiment whatever disqualification-prevention work it does for non-inferential evaluative knowledge. The problem they face is that, absent a further development of this disqualification-prevention work, they are left with a very thin notion of “sentiment”.

In the example transcendental argument I provided for transcendental sentimentalism, I identified the following disqualification work for the sentiment: it prevents it being the case that the non-inferential evaluator is unmotivated or “unmoved” by their non-inferential evaluation. That we are motivated by our moral judgments is a central explanandum of almost every sentimentalism, so if transcendental sentimentalism were to be explanatorily fruitful at all, it would at least need to account for this fact.

However, because this conclusion is arrived at via a priori transcendental argument, it is not the case that the transcendental sentimentalist can straightforwardly equate this inertia-preventing state with what is commonly understood to be “sentiment” or “emotion” by empirical psychologists. All that they know about this state is that it is motivating—but it is not as if sentiments are the only naturally possible manifestation of a motivating process. Consequently, it would be helpful to the transcendental sentimentalist if they can identify other disqualification-prevention work for this antecedent psychological state to do, and doubly helpful if in doing so this state becomes more recognizably a ‘sentiment’.

The metaethical minimalist, in their commitment to the epistemic condition, has identified an additional condition on non-inferential evaluative knowledge—that it be preceded by an in-conception or conception-independent presentation of the object of evaluation. In the context of chapter 5, this was presented as an articulation of the more permissive conditions on non-inferential evaluation when compared to perception, which can only involve a conception-independent presentation. However, it is not the case that non-inferential evaluative knowledge can obtain absent *any* form of presentation—in such a situation the evaluator would lack the proper epistemic relationship to the object of evaluation to count as a non-inferential authority on it.⁵³ Therefore, in order to not be disqualified from counting as a non-inferential authority on a matter of value, a presentation-involving psychological process must obtain. More specifically, it must be a

⁵³ I am intentionally leaving open the possibility of inferential evaluative knowledge that occurs on the basis of an inference from a general moral principle to an evaluative judgment. In such a case, there may be no non-inferential evaluative reaction to the in-conception or conception-independent presentation of the object. In this instance, it is still, in principle, possible to consider the moral principle relevant to the situation and then infer the moral value of the object.

psychological process that is similarly responsive to objects presented in-conception and conception-independently, unlike perception.

The transcendental sentimentalist, if they pair their position with metaethical minimalism, can more plausibly regard their disqualification-preventing psychological process as a ‘sentiment’ because they can identify it as the very same disqualification-preventing process described in the preceding paragraph. Sentiment is thus the single psychological process that is responsible for both conditioning the motivation of the non-inferential evaluative knower and while also involving the objectual presentation which conditions the knower’s appropriate epistemic relationship with the object of evaluation. Transcendentally speaking, both conditions obtaining are necessary for the evaluator to count (in the normative sense) as having non-inferential knowledge. If there was no sentimental response antecedent to the evaluative judgment, then the judgement would be disqualified from counting as a piece of non-inferential evaluative knowledge because 1) it would not be motivating and 2) it would not be conditioned by an objectual presentation. This matches up well with our ordinary understanding of sentiment—emotions and sentiments tend to move us to act in various ways and they are responses to objects, events, and states of affairs both as they occur in the world and in-conception.

I have deliberately chosen the term “presentation-involving psychological process” to avoid any specific characterization of the representationality of sentiment. The only commitment either the transcendental sentimentalist or metaethical minimalist need make is that sentiments are always accompanied by presentations of objects—this is not the same

as saying that sentiments are a sui-generis kind of mental representation or even that sentiments themselves have a representational nature. It is perfectly consistent with the pairing of positions under discussion that there are exactly two kinds of sui-generis objectual presentations—perceptions and imaginings. Under this kind of view, sentiments are presentation-involving psychological states in virtue of occurring only on the basis of either a perception or imagining; plausibly on this view, sentiments are a kind of motivating *attitude* toward these cognitive bases.⁵⁴ This clarification is necessary for ensuring that, when paired with metaethical minimalism, transcendental sentimentalism does not necessarily become a variety of epistemological sentimentalism. This need not be the case if sentiments themselves do not have representational content nor any other justification-conferring properties, as is conceivable on the kind of view I am presenting. To repeat a conclusion from the previous chapter, sentiments can condition the possibility of knowledge without it being the case that they play a justification-conferring role. This applies *mutatis mutandis* to the new conditioning role identified for it by the minimalist.

III. A Metaethical Minimalist's Sentimentalist Model of Evaluation

Our last task is to bring into view a sentimentalist model of evaluation which is consistent with metaethical minimalism as it has been described in this work.

The minimalist thinks that there are objective moral truths but that there are no truthmakers which make these truths true. The use we *can* get out “made true by” language in the moral domain is this: “Moral propositions, when they are true, are true in

⁵⁴ See Deonna & Teroni (2012, 2015) for excellent introductions to this kind of view of emotion.

virtue of their being licensed by moral principles of varying generality.” Why is it the case that torturing innocents for fun is wrong? Because it violates the moral principle in virtue of which “Torturing innocents for fun is morally wrong” is true. Perhaps this principle is something like “The pointless dehumanization of innocents is categorically forbidden.” There is simply no further answer to the question “In virtue of what is torturing innocents for fun wrong?” besides the moral principle(s) which serve(s) the proposition’s justificatory ground(s). If it is the case that we can have non-inferential knowledge of moral value, then it must be possible for us to come to know that a moral proposition is true without inferring it is true from the principle in virtue of which it is true. Sentimental response conditions the possibility of coming to know moral value in this way.

Sentimental response is a necessary condition of the possibility of counting as having non-inferential evaluative knowledge because, absent this response the evaluator would be disqualified from being an authority on the evaluative matter at hand. This is for at least two reasons: 1) the evaluator would be unmoved by their evaluation and develop no new dispositions on the basis of it, and 2) the evaluator would not exhibit the antecedent psychological process which ensured that their evaluation was responsive to either a in-conception or conception-independent presentation of the object of evaluation. To repeat, while I have not offered an argument in favor of the judgment internalism asserted to be necessary in 1), my argument that the conditioned aspect of evaluation represented in 2) is a necessary feature of evaluation occurs in chapter 5 of this work.

It is not the case on this model that the sentiment represents, responds to, or correlates with a “real” manifestation of value. This is because, according to metaethical

minimalism, it is a philosophical mistake to regard value as real.⁵⁵ However, it is at least a minimal constraint on non-inferential evaluation that sentimental response be sufficiently correlated with the presentation of objects, events, and states of affairs which are morally valuable or disvaluable. This proper correlation, if not a consequence of the causal effect of value, is plausibly the effect of socialization, broadly understood. However, it would be a mistake to regard a dependence on socialization as evidence that what is valuable or disvaluable is relative to what we are socialized to non-inferentially evaluate as such. This socialization is effective or ineffective on the basis of whether it results in the development of a sentimental-response disposition that's actualization correlates with the presence of that which is mind-independently and convention-independently valuable or disvaluable.

On this picture, it would be a mistake to regard sentiments as conditioning the “accessing” moral truths, principles, or value. As we saw in chapter 3, “access” language is most appropriate for explaining a knowing relation between epistemic agent and truthmaker (or evidence of the latter). As an alternative, I suggested “apprehension” as the correct descriptor of the epistemic relation between an evaluator and moral truth.

However, it is not always the case that someone with non-inferential evaluative knowledge will non-inferentially apprehend the principle in virtue of which their knowledge is true. This directly parallels the state of things for perception and empirical truthmakers; I may have non-inferential perceptual knowledge that this mug in front of me is red, but I may not have immediate epistemic access to the physical grounds of this truth. The difference between the two cases is this: plausibly any true evaluative authority will be, in principle,

⁵⁵ Following Putnam's similar point, this fact does not impugn the propriety of speaking of value as if it is real in the course of ordinary moral discourse.

able to approximate or make explicit determining moral principles. In practice, this may be no more complicated than the evaluator being able to answer the question “Why is it that X is morally wrong?” upon non-inferentially judging that X is morally wrong. However, sentimental response is not a necessary condition of the possibility of this reconstructive activity; or at least it is not obvious what disqualification work sentimental response has to do in this context.

Finally, it is worth once more summarizing the state of the dialectic between the metaethical minimalist and the truthmaker theorist. You’ll recall that the outcome of chapter 2 was that the minimalist is licensed to take up an *ab initio* attitude of non-acceptance towards MTMC—the conditional which states that every moral truth requires an existent truthmaker. At that point, the truthmaker theorist is obligated to offer reasons to believe MTMC. Chapters 3 and 4 discussed two attempts at moving the minimalist off of their stance, which I claimed the minimalist could successfully defend their minimalism against. Chapters 5 and 6 offered positive developments of metaethical minimalism as a demonstration that a quietism or antipathy towards metaethical theorizing is not a necessary consequence of the minimalist stance. The truthmaker theorist may find any number of points on which he could push back on the positive developments I have offered, but it is important to note that minimalism does not depend on the viability of either the epistemic condition or transcendental sentimentalism. At its core, metaethical minimalism remains the non-acceptance of MTMC accompanied by the belief that there are objective moral truths. If this chapter along with the preceding one is

successful, they succeed at adding on to this core stance by making it more explanatorily productive and philosophically satisfying.

There is no doubt that the truthmaker theorist will be left unsatisfied with the state of the dialectic as I have described it. Some of their complaints may take the following form:

“There must be some value that is being responded to by our sentimental capacities”

“There must be something that makes moral propositions true rather than not true”

“There must be something that grounds true moral judgments beyond true principles”

Nothing in this work has discounted the possibility that each of these complaints is true. This is because the metaethical minimalism I have demarcated, defended, and developed is not one that is premised upon a rejection of moral truthmakers, but rather a lack of belief in them. Consequently, if the minimalist is missing something, it is up to the truthmaker theorist to make it clear what fault there is in the minimalist account that is a consequence of missing truthmakers. What is not sufficient to advance this debate is a simple restatement of the central thesis in contention: that there must be moral truthmakers for there to be objective truth. What I have aimed to do in this work is to show that there is work for the metaethical minimalist to do besides standing pat in their non-acceptance. They can and should engage any substantive truthmaker theorist objections to their minimalism; they can and should make their position more attractive by developing a

complete account of what our evaluative practice looks like if minimalism is true; they can and should identify philosophical allies like transcendental sentimentalism which can strengthen their minimalism. Instead of falling into quietism, the metaethical minimalist can and should do the plentiful philosophical work left for them to do.

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