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Metasemantics for the Relaxed*

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Abstract In this paper, I develop a metasemantics for relaxed moral realism. More precisely, I argue that relaxed realists should be inferentialists about meaning and explain that the role of evaluative moral vocabulary is to organise and structure language exit transitions, much as the role of theoretical vocabulary is to organise and structure language entry transitions.

Keywords Relaxed moral realism • Metasemantics • Inferentialism • Expressivism • Metaethics

1 Introduction

My aim in this paper is to defend relaxed moral realism.¹ As a moral realist, I hold that there are moral truths, that these truths are mind-independent and irreducibly normative, that we can gain moral knowledge of these moral truths and that we form straightforward beliefs about them which we express by use of moral assertions. As a relaxed realist, I maintain that none of the statements I have just made require me to enter into any robustly metaphysical commitments that are thought by many to be problematic. As such, I also take as deeply misguided an approach to morality's objectivity on the basis of general metaphysical considerations, such as causal efficacy, explanatory potency or deliberative indispensability, say. Instead, morality's objectivity is itself a moral matter to be defended from within moral discourse, or so I submit.

Of these theses, I am very confident. However, there are three observations that trouble me. The first is that sophisticated expressivists agree with literally everything I have said so far: They too maintain that there are mind-independent, irreducible moral truths about which we can form true beliefs that we express in assertoric sentences, whilst holding that we speak from within moral discourse when defending morality's

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¹ 'Relaxed' realism also goes under the heading of non-metaphysical realism, quietism, or even anti-realist cognitivism. For relaxed realism, see Nagel (1986), Scanlon (2014, 2017) Parfit (2011), Kramer (2009) and Dworkin (1996, 2011); for metaphysical normative realism, see Brink (1989), Shafer-Landau (2003) and Enoch (2011); for sophisticated expressivism, see Blackburn (1998), Gibbard (2003) and Ridge (2014). For internal and external questions, see Carnap (1950).

objectivity.² What, then, distinguishes relaxed realism from expressivism? Or could it be that relaxed realism *just is* a form of sophisticated expressivism, rather than standing in genuine metaethical competition with it? My response can certainly not be that as a relaxed realist I employ notions of truth, property and belief that are metaphysically more committing than those expressivists would be prepared to accept. After all, it would then no longer be clear what distinguishes relaxed realism from metaphysical realism! To examine which response I could give instead will thus be the first objective of this paper.

The second observation concerns Schroeter/Schroeter's (2019: 194) convincing argument that any metaethical position faces what they call the "generalized integration challenge", i.e. the "task of providing, for a given area, a simultaneously acceptable metaphysics, epistemology and metasemantics, and showing them to be so."³ Relaxed realists say quite a bit about lightweight moral metaphysics and moral epistemology. However, they have so far given a wide berth to questions about the meaning of moral terms.⁴ Possibly, this is so because they think that they need not become engaged in metasemantic debate in the first place; maybe, they even believe that they should not become so involved. Rather, just as relaxed realists want to avoid substantively *metaphysical* enquiries, they should also eschew substantively *metasemantic* discussions, or so it might be argued.

I believe that this is wrong. For, whilst it is not obviously implausible to suggest that nothing metaphysically interesting can be said about moral objectivity, it *is* utterly implausible to submit that nothing informative can be said about why 'right' means RIGHT, rather than BLUE, JUST or TABLE, say.⁵ Put differently, meanings are not brute facts; there must be *some* explanation of how words come to have their specific meanings. Digging in one's heels by simply refusing to engage with metasemantic questions or denying their significance is, therefore, not a convincing strategy for anybody to adopt. Rather, relaxed realists must give a convincing account of moral vocabulary that dovetails in with relaxed moral metaphysics and epistemology, just as any other metaethicist must do for her respective metaethical account. The second objective of this project, then, is to make a start on tackling this metasemantic component of the generalised integration challenge on behalf of relaxed realists.

In what follows, I will address these first two objectives together, by arguing that in order to establish whether or not relaxed realism differs from sophisticated expressivism despite their agreement on the moral interpretation of moral objectivity, we need to consider which metasemantic account of moral vocabulary relaxed realists could endorse and in which way, if any, this account diverges from an expressivist position.⁶ As we will see, I will submit that relaxed realism does indeed differ from ideationalist expressivism,

² Compare also Copp (2018) and Ridge (2019). For a small sample of further worries about relaxed realism, see McPherson (2008, 2011), McGrath (2014), Wodak (2017) and the contributions by Clarke-Doane, Rosen, and Enoch/McPherson to the symposium on Scanlon's *Being Realistic About Reasons* in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (2017).

³ As will be explained in the next section, metasemantics does not assign specific meanings to terms, but asks what makes it the case that these terms possess their specific meanings. I understand and approach the generalised integration challenge in slightly different terms than Schroeter/Schroeter (2019), as I explain in footnote 9.

⁴ Arguably, Dworkin's (2011) interpretive approach and Kramer's (2017) thoughts on expressivism constitute an exception.

⁵ I use small caps for concepts, whereas words are put in inverted commas.

⁶ As such, I closely follow suggestions put forward within the creeping minimalism debate (Dreier 2004), according to which metaethical positions can be distinguished on the basis of their competing explanations of moral content even if minimalism starts creeping.

according to which moral vocabulary expresses conative mental states (Blackburn 1998; Gibbard 2003; Ridge 2014). At the same time, I will argue that one very attractive way for relaxed realists to meet the generalised integration challenge is to adopt an alternative non-representationalist theory in the form of inferentialist metaconceptualism, which suggests that moral vocabulary functions as a second-order metaconceptual device (Brandom 1994; Chrisman 2008, 2011, 2016).⁷ As such, my enquiry into relaxed realism also becomes an enquiry into inferentialism.

This, in turn, gives rise to a third observation. Namely, it is noticeable that when discussing moral vocabulary, inferentialists such as Robert Brandom (1994) and Matthew Chrisman (2016) generally focus on the meaning of deontic operators such as ‘ought’ and ‘permissible’, rather than on that of evaluative terms such as ‘morally good’, ‘morally desirable’ or ‘morally bad’. Now, if evaluative terms were in some sense semantically reducible to deontic notions, this observation would not be particularly worrying, as the former could, in principle, receive the same metasemantic analysis as the latter.⁸ However, as we will see later, it is not plausible to assume that such reducibility relations hold. Accordingly, in order to provide a comprehensive account of moral vocabulary, relaxed realists cannot simply draw on existing inferentialist explanations, but need to expand them so as to cover evaluative moral notions in addition to deontic operators. Developing an inferentialist account of evaluative notions on behalf of relaxed realists will thus be the third objective of this paper.

To pursue all three objectives, I will follow a structure which can be described as the argumentation equivalent of a Russian doll, in that I will proceed from larger to more detailed considerations. As such, I will start in §2 by specifying my understanding of the metasemantic challenge to relaxed realists and why in response they should adopt an inferentialist metasemantics. Which specific account of moral vocabulary relaxed realists should defend within this inferentialist framework will be discussed in §3, where I will argue that their own minimalist commitments push relaxed realists into defending a form of inferentialist metaconceptualism, according to which normative vocabulary plays a specific metaconceptual role within normative practices. Which metaconceptual role this is and how it can be applied to evaluative terms will be specified in §4 and §5 by drawing a parallel between evaluative and theoretical vocabulary. More precisely, based on an inferentialist account of explanatory notions, according to which explanation is understood by appeal to inferential patterns that are characterised by certain structural features, I will make the novel suggestion that evaluative terms such as ‘morally good’ function to explain proprieties of language exit transitions, where having this function amounts to featuring within a framework of moral theories that systematises language exit transitions in such a way as to identify an inferential pattern that contains only good language exit moves. Crucially, this inferentialist take on explanatory function does not engender any

⁷ Copp (2018: 575, 587-588) makes a similar suggestion by considering whether a relaxed realist such as Parfit could adopt a conceptual role semantics, yet does not flesh this out further. By suggesting that relaxed realists should be inferentialists, I agree with Ridge (2019) that relaxed realism does *not* constitute a genuinely new metaethical theory, as it does not defend a novel account of moral vocabulary that would stand in competition with existing representationalist and non-representationalist metaethical accounts.

Adopting inferentialism need not be relaxed realists only possible response to the generalised integration challenge. For instance, Schroeter/Schroeter’s ‘deflationary naturalism’ (2013, Ms.) might provide another avenue. Whether or not it does depends, amongst other things, on how happy relaxed realists would be to buy into naturalism once it has been deflated.

⁸ For more on this idea, see Chrisman (2016: 209-214).

substantive metaphysical commitments about moral properties. Moreover, the systematisation process on which it is based is undertaken from within moral discourse. As such, understanding evaluative terms as tools that systematise language exits fits perfectly with the relaxed take on moral discourse. At the same time, it is clear that accounting for the meaning of moral terms on an inferentialist basis itself draws on normative notions such as inferential proprieties, reason, commitment and entitlement. Explaining why this irreducibly normative nature of inferentialism is a boon, rather than a problem of this metasemantic account for relaxed realism, will round off the paper in §6.

In what follows, I will predominantly focus on moral vocabulary, rather than evaluative and normative vocabulary more widely. This is not to imply that relaxed realism stops at the boundaries of morality; rather it should be seen as an attempt to reduce the significant degree of complexity that would come with a metasemantic investigation into different kinds of vocabularies. For, whilst we should expect these vocabularies to share some function that singles them out as evaluative or normative respectively, it is still reasonable to anticipate that their specific functions will differ somewhat depending on whether we are dealing with moral, epistemic or aesthetic vocabulary, say. As such, what I will say here about moral vocabulary need not be straightforwardly transferrable to other evaluative and normative terms. At the same time, it should give us a pretty good idea of what the relaxed take on these other vocabularies could look like.

2 The metasemantic challenge and the appeal of inferentialism

The generalised integration challenge, then, demands that metaethicists must be able to provide a metasemantic account of moral vocabulary that is compatible with their positions on moral metaphysics and epistemology.⁹ Metasemantics, in turn, asks *in virtue of what* words and sentences possess the meaning that they have. Meeting the metasemantic component of the generalised integration challenge thus requires relaxed realists to explain in virtue of what it is that *moral* terms have their particular meanings. This need not call for development of a brand-new, general approach to meaning which provides a novel take on what constitutes meaning. Rather, for meeting the metasemantic challenge, it is fully sufficient for relaxed realists to adopt an existing approach to meaning, while at the same time carving out a distinctly relaxed position about moral vocabulary within it.

Which general approach to meaning this is going to be is, in turn, tightly constrained by the commitments that underlie the specifically relaxed take on moral realism. As I have hinted in the introduction, I believe that an inferentialist account of meaning, according to which meanings are constituted by the inferential roles in which expressions stand, meets these constraints particularly well (Brandom 1994, Chrisman 2016). Three primary reasons explain why. Firstly, relaxed realists are generally minimalists about

⁹ As I have hinted above, Schroeter/Schroeter's (2019) understanding of and approach to the generalised integration challenge differs somewhat from mine, in that they assume a broadly extensional semantics for normative terms that understands meaning in terms of reference. As such, meeting their generalised integration challenge amounts to explaining reference determination, and thus explaining what determines that specific reference assignments are correct. I, in turn, will work with a conceptual role semantics and bracket further important metasemantic questions such as those concerning reference fixing. I hope that my appropriating their term 'generalised integration challenge' will not constitute too much of a misappropriation. I thank Laura and François Schroeter for clarifying their understanding of the generalised integration challenge.

notions such as truth, fact, property, reference and representation.¹⁰ This is no coincidence. For, if facts are nothing more than true statements and if calling a statement true simply amounts to asserting this very statement, then submitting that there is a moral fact that I ought to treat my nephews equally boils down to making the *moral* assertion that I ought to treat my nephews equally. Similarly, if properties are the shadows of predicates, then all it takes for there to be a moral property such as fairness is for a moral claim, such as ‘Equal treatment of my nephews is fair’, to be true. Hence, by relieving truth, property and fact talk of additional metaphysical ballast, minimalism dovetails perfectly with the relaxed, moral interpretation of moral objectivity. However, it also entails that moral truths and properties cannot shoulder any explanatory weight within a corresponding account of meaning. For instance, if the truth-schema ‘S is true iff S’ presupposes that we know what ‘S’ means, this schema cannot explain what meaning consists in. Likewise, if properties are the shadows of predicates, we first need an understanding of the latter before we can turn to the former. And if reference is abstracted from meaning assignments so as to make sentences come out as true, the former cannot determine the latter. Consequently, a metasemantics that is to be compatible with relaxed realism cannot employ TRUTH as its foundational concept,¹¹ nor explain meanings in terms of metaphysically substantive representational relations between linguistic expressions and what they are about. Instead, it must choose a different master concept, such as USE, and adopt a non-representationalist order of explanation, according to which expressions’ meanings together with aboutness-relations are explained in terms of use (Brandom 1994: xii). Inferentialism is such a use-based, non-representationalist theory of meaning.

Secondly, inferentialists spell out use in terms of the inferential roles that assertions assume within the ‘game of giving and asking for reasons’. More precisely, making a move within this game is elucidated in terms of the deontic statuses of commitment and entitlement, where undertaking a commitment by making an assertion engenders the responsibility to provide reasons for this commitment if challenged, and being entitled to a commitment amounts to permissibly undertaking it (Brandom 1994: 160). Inferentialism, then, is a normative theory of meaning, in that its metalanguage contains irreducibly normative vocabulary such as commitment, entitlement and inferential proprieties. This also entails that the structure of these meaning-conferring practices can be elucidated only from *within* these normative practices (Brandom 1994: 649). Just as relaxed realists emphasise the discourse-internal nature of questions about moral metaphysics and epistemology, then, inferentialists hold that questions about meaning must receive discourse-internal answers by enquiring in which reason-giving relations sentences stand. Focus on how we are normatively committed, rather than merely disposed, to using words might well prove crucial for a relaxed metasemantics, or so I shall argue later.

Finally, inferentialism offers much flexibility in the treatment of different vocabularies. That is, although it takes all assertoric sentences—no matter whether empirical, mathematical or moral, say—to be united in that their meanings are to be understood in terms of their inferential roles, it also leaves much room to accommodate their diversity by highlighting their different functions. This functional diversity can helpfully be spelt out

¹⁰ For instance, see Scanlon (2014: 43), Parfit (2011: 756, n. 295), Kramer (2009: 261) and (less clearly) Dworkin (2011: 173). This leaves open which minimalist, non-representationalist account of truth to adopt (Horwich 1998, Brandom 1994, Price 1988).

¹¹ This is not to imply that minimalists are barred from using TRUTH in their account of meaning altogether. For instance, see Chrisman (2016) and Köhler (2018) on the combination of truth-conditional semantics and non-representationalism and Williams’ (1999) thoughts on what he calls a meaning-calculus.

along two dimensions. The first distinguishes between two different roles that vocabularies can play within the game of giving and asking for reasons by differentiating between *first-order conceptual* vocabularies on the one hand, and *second-order metaconceptual* vocabularies on the other. First-order vocabularies are those that enable us to conceptualise our commitments about reality and how to act within it (Chrisman 2016: 203, 2017: 269; Brandom 2008: 46). ‘My bike is red’ or ‘I shall take my bike to the bicycle repair shop’ are thus examples of first-order commitments. Second-order vocabularies, in turn, are metaconceptual devices that make explicit inferential connections between other words.¹² For instance, assume that I entertain the commitment that my bike is red and infer from this that my bike is coloured. Now, I can certainly *make* this inference by committing myself to ‘My bike is coloured’ whenever I also commit myself to ‘My bike is red’, just as I can condone anyone else’s committing herself in this way. However, what I *cannot* do is *talk* about this inferential relation between ‘red’ and ‘coloured’ unless I have the *linguistic* means to state that *if* my bike is red, *then* it is also coloured. This linguistic means is, in turn, logical vocabulary. Accordingly, since logical terms function to make explicit inferential relations between words such as ‘red’ and ‘coloured’ which would otherwise remain implicit in our practices, they perform a second-order, metaconceptual function within our language game.

The second dimension along which functional diversity can be specified identifies three different kinds of moves that we can make with regard to the language game. To start with, there are *intra-linguistic* transitions, which are inferential moves through which we take up a position within the game in response to another position which we have already assumed therein. For instance, when inferring from the claim that my bike is red that my bike is coloured, I make such an inferential move within language. Next, there are *language entry* moves, which establish links between language and our environment by enabling us to take up positions within the language game as non-inferentially elicited reactions to non-linguistic situations. For example, if I see a red bike across the road, I can report my perception of redness by asserting ‘The bike over there is red’. Finally, there are *language exit* moves, which make it possible to respond to positions taken up within the language game by performing corresponding actions. For instance, when committing myself to the claim that my bike urgently needs a maintenance check, I can act upon this commitment by taking my bike to the next bicycle repair shop.

Inferentialism thus defends what Price (2008: 3) calls the “diverse unity of propositions”, in that language has a “downtown” in the form of our commitments’ assertoric expression (Brandom 2000: 14), whilst the characteristic nature of these assertions can be captured through the different functions that they perform within our linguistic practices. Given the high degree of functional versatility that inferentialism affords, then, relaxed realists should have a good chance of developing a metasemantic account of moral terms that coheres with their relaxed take on moral truths.

Hence, it is its non-representationalism, normativity and capacity for functional diversification that makes inferentialism particularly attractive for relaxed realists.¹³ For the remainder of this paper, I will, therefore, assume that relaxed realists adopt inferentialism as a general approach to meaning. Which *particular* function they should ascribe to moral

¹² In Chrisman’s (2016: 193) terms, “[t]his is the idea that some concepts do not earn their keep from the way they let us represent pieces of reality; rather, they serve as metaconceptual devices for embracing commitment to features of the conceptual (inferential) framework in which ordinary representational concepts have determinate application.”

¹³ This is not to deny that certain other metasemantic theories might share these features and could, therefore, be equally appealing to relaxed realists.

vocabulary within this inferentialist framework will, in turn, be given a first response in the next section, which will then be further specified in sections 4 and 5.

3 Relaxed realism and inferentialist metaconceptualism

So far, I have said that relaxed realists hold that moral judgements express beliefs, that moral claims are straightforward assertions and that there are objective moral facts and properties, yet that they do not take these commitments to engender any heavyweight metaphysical implications for moral properties and our access to them. I have suggested further that relaxed realists must be able to provide a convincing metasemantic account of moral vocabulary and that they should employ inferentialism in order to do so. Finally, I have explained that a vocabulary's function can be fleshed out by appeal not only to the distinction between first-order conceptual vocabularies and second-order metaconceptual vocabularies, but also the different moves that we can make within the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Given this background, then, here is the role which I believe that relaxed realists should ascribe to moral vocabulary: They should submit that moral vocabulary performs a specific *metaconceptual* function which concerns language *exit* transitions. Why they should do so is explained by relaxed realists' rejection of a substantive conception of moral metaphysics.

To see why, let us start by elucidating why relaxed realists should take moral vocabulary to be metaconceptual, rather than first-order conceptual, and do so by a method of elimination. First-order conceptual vocabularies, we have said, are those which either allow us to conceptualise what the world is like or how to act within it. Assume, then, that moral vocabulary performed a conceptual function regarding how to act. More precisely, assume that it were used to conceptualise my intention to visit my granny, or donate to charity, or spend more time with my nephews, say. If so, it would be hard to see in which way this position substantively differed from that of ideationalist expressivism, according to which it is the function of moral vocabulary to express conative mental states with a specific world-to-mind direction of fit. Given the reservations that relaxed realists generally harbour about this version of expressivism, this is not an attractive proposition.¹⁴

¹⁴ These reservations are usually based on doubts about the internal adequacy of expressivism, say with regard to the authority of morality, fundamental moral fallibility, moral disagreement or moral deliberation (Scanlon 2014: ch. 3; Parfit 2011: ch. 28). For the record, I believe that quite a few of these objections are based on a deficient understanding of sophisticated expressivism. Moreover, note that just as with expressivism, inferentialism is likely to face similar worries about internal adequacy. Accordingly, if I am right in arguing that relaxed realists should adopt inferentialism, the success of their own relaxed position presupposes that the worries that they themselves have harboured about internal adequacy can be successfully assuaged. By implication, if you believe that these concerns cannot be dispelled, or that non-representationalism cannot deliver 'proper' realism, you cannot be a relaxed realist.

Also for the record, the relationship between the ideationalist-inferentialist position sketched above and ideationalist expressivism is likely to be more complex than I make out here, particularly when the latter is spelt out in terms of Gibbardian plans, rather than simpler pro-attitudes. Still, note that I do *not* seek to motivate relaxed realism's adoption of inferentialist metaconceptualism on the grounds of any objections to ideationalist expressivism, but by holding that inferentialist metaconceptualism provides a *better fit* for relaxed realists' purposes than ideationalist

Alternatively, assume that moral vocabulary had the function of allowing us to conceptualise or describe what the world is like. Now, since in a minimalist sense of ‘describe’ and ‘world’ any assertion describes what the world is like—mathematical assertions truly or falsely describe what mathematical reality is like, just as empirical and moral assertions truly or falsely describe what the natural and moral worlds are like respectively—‘description’ and ‘representation’ must be given a more substantive reading if functioning as a descriptive device is to help us separate vocabularies that perform this function from those that do not.¹⁵ How exactly this substantive sense of description and representation is to be spelt out does not matter for my purposes.¹⁶ Rather, it is sufficient to point out that by presupposing *some substantive* conception of description and representation, functioning as a descriptive device cannot feature in a *relaxed* account of moral vocabulary which rejects any such substantive interpretation of moral description and representation. Consequently, whilst relaxed realists should not proclaim that moral vocabulary has the first-order conceptual function of expressing practical commitments on pains of being pulled into some form of ideationalist expressivism, they cannot proclaim that it performs the first-order conceptual function of describing our environment on pains of being driven into metaphysically substantive commitments. Moral vocabulary, then, must play a metaconceptual role.

With regard to which kind of moves, then—intralinguistic, language entry or language exit—does moral vocabulary perform this metaconceptual function? Explicating features of language entry transitions can quickly be ruled out: After all, what should moral vocabulary possibly make explicit with regard to non-inferentially triggered reports such as ‘This bike is red’, ‘Mads plays with his toy fire engine’ or ‘Finn grimaced when biting on the lemon slice’ upon seeing a red bike, looking at Mads or observing Finn’s face?¹⁷ Making explicit inferential proprieties of purely intralinguistic moves can be similarly excluded, as it is no more convincing to suggest that moral vocabulary’s sole function concerns moves *within* language, for instance from ‘My bike is red’ to ‘My bike is coloured’, from ‘They boys ate the last biscuits’ to ‘There are no biscuits left’, or from ‘Sissi wants to become an opera singer’ to ‘Sissi has changed her mind’. This, then, leaves language exit transitions: Moral vocabulary must perform its metaconceptual role in relation to exits from the language game, for instance when forming the practical commitment that I shall no longer eat meat upon learning about the meat industry’s impact on CO₂ emissions, or that I shall vote for a specific party based on its promotion of certain welfare policies. Given the intimate link that many detect between moral claims and

expressivism. For advantages of inferentialist metaconceptualism over ideationalist expressivism, see Chrisman (2016: 6.3.3).

¹⁵ Compare Chrisman (2016: 204, fn. 1) on this point, who explains that “a sentence carries descriptive content just in case its use to make an assertion carries direct inferential consequences about the way reality is. (Roughly, it has to imply that reality is matched by its truth condition, whatever theses happen to be.)”, where this ‘matching’ must be more substantive “than the deflationary way of a predicate being true of [an object].”

¹⁶ For instance, it might be fleshed out in terms of causal relations between us and what we describe (Brink 1989), appeal to natural selection (Sinclair 2006), a substantive sense of property which constrains the conceptual role of corresponding predicates (Wedgwood 2007), specific explanations of success (Boyd 1989), or language entry transitions (Tiefensee 2016).

¹⁷ I have said in §1 that whilst we should expect all normative vocabularies to share some feature that makes them normative, we should also expect their functions to differ. We might have come across one such difference here, in that in contrast to *moral* normative vocabulary, *epistemic* normative vocabulary might very well perform a metaconceptual function with regard to language entry transitions, say concerning the explication of attributed evidential relations.

action, proposing that the role of moral vocabulary concerns language exit moves *is* plausible.

Pulling these different strings together, we can thus conclude that given their own relaxed stance on moral properties, relaxed realists must maintain that moral vocabulary performs a *metaconceptual* function in relation to language *exit* transitions. Albeit a fringe position in metaethics, this suggestion is, of course, not new. Rather, inferentialists, such as Wilfrid Sellars, Robert Brandom and, in a slightly diverging manner, Matthew Chrisman, have defended it for some time. Interestingly, then, we can see that once we factor their relaxed commitments into considerations about meaning, relaxed realists find themselves joining inferentialists in advocating a specifically metaconceptual understanding of moral vocabulary. My defence of relaxed realism thus amounts to defending inferentialist metaconceptualism.

4 A first gloss: Metaconceptual functions and moral vocabulary

We now know that relaxed realists should adopt inferentialism about meaning and ascribe a metaconceptual function to moral vocabulary which concerns language exit transitions. What exactly does this metaconceptual function involve, though? To find an answer, I will first examine which responses inferentialists have so far provided with regard to the deontic operator ‘ought’ and explain why they are insufficient to provide a comprehensive account of moral vocabulary that would also include evaluative moral terms. I will then suggest how inferentialist conceptualism can be extended so as to provide a convincing account of evaluative moral terms.

4.1. Metaconceptual functions: Why focussing on ‘ought’ is not enough

In order to achieve a better grip on metaconceptual functions, then, let us first have a closer look at the inferentialist take on a deontic operator such as ‘ought’. There are two such takes currently on the table, one provided by Brandom and the other by Chrisman.

According to Brandom, metaconceptual vocabularies are those that make something *explicit* that would otherwise remain *implicit* in our practices. To elaborate, look again at his take on logical vocabulary:

Conditionals make *explicit* something that otherwise was *implicit* in the practical sorting of non-logical inferences into good and bad. Where before one could only in practice *take* or *treat* inferences *as* good or bad, after the algorithmic introduction of conditionals one can endorse or reject the inference by explicitly *saying* something, by asserting or denying the corresponding conditionals. What the conditional says explicitly is what one endorsed implicitly by doing what one did. The expressive role distinctive of conditionals whose use is elaborated in the way I have just specified is to *codify* inferences, to *specify* inferential practices-or-abilities, to *explicate* them, in the sense of making explicit something that was implicit in them (Brandom 2008: 46).

If we are to follow Brandom, moral vocabulary too must make something explicit if it is to perform a metaconceptual function. Bearing in mind that this explicative function must concern language exit transitions, the most direct way to transfer Brandom’s thoughts about conditionals to moral vocabulary is thus to declare that normative “vocabulary plays the same expressive role on the *practical* side that *conditionals* do on the *theoretical* side” (Brandom 2000: 89). Accordingly, just as the conditional ‘If it is raining,

then the streets will be wet’ makes explicit the material propriety of the following episode of theoretical reasoning:

It is raining.

∴ The streets will be wet.

we could suggest that the moral sentence ‘I ought to spend more time with my nephews’ explicates the material propriety of the following episode of practical reasoning:

Spending more time with my nephews makes them happy.

∴ I shall spend more time with my nephews.

Importantly, note that the moral sentence we use to explicate the goodness of this language exit move is an assertion. Accordingly, performing this metaconceptual, explicative function is fully compatible with having assertoric form—indeed, bearing in mind Brandom’s remark about assertions being the ‘downtown’ in the game of giving and asking for reasons, moral sentences *must* have assertoric form in order to feature in this game.¹⁸ Secondly, note that nothing in this account bars us from maintaining that moral sentences express beliefs.¹⁹ Both observations are good news for relaxed realists.

Chrisman (2017: 269), in turn, offers the following take on the metaconceptual function of ‘ought’:

According to the argument I develop, the conceptual role of [ought] is like other intensional operators, such as ‘might’ or ‘probably’, in that its addition to a sentence shifts something about how the sentence puts forward some embedded piece of content. For example, ... we might think that [‘I ought to spend more time with my nephews’] does not represent [me] ... as having some property, but rather conceive of this sentence as a vehicle for putting forward a more basic piece of content ([I spend more time with my nephews]) as a normative necessity, roughly something that is, so to speak, ruled in by the beliefs and norms/prescriptions held to be commonly agreed upon in an ongoing conversation.

Simplifying greatly, what the moral ‘ought’ does in a sentence such as ‘I ought to spend more time with my nephews’, is thus not to represent *oughtness* in any metaphysically substantive way, or function as a descriptive device, or to express my intention to spend more time with my nephews, but to shift the focus of evaluation of an embedded sentence such as ‘I spend more time with my nephews’ from the actual world to morally best worlds.

In what follows, I will simply assume, rather than argue, that Chrisman’s account is preferable to Brandom’s.²⁰ Still, even if we grant as much with regard to ‘ought’, it is

¹⁸ For how inferentialism and expressivism compare regarding the Frege/Geach problem, see Warren (2015); for how they compare regarding explanations of disagreement, see Köhler (Ms.).

¹⁹ Chrisman agrees that ought-sentences express beliefs (2016: 215) and observes: “The labels ‘cognitivism’ and ‘noncognitivism’ suggest there is no third way, but the substance of the views doesn’t rule out a view according to which ethical words contribute neither representational content nor emotive/evaluative content to the sentences in which they figure” (Chrisman 2017: 269).

²⁰ To give the briefest of hints as to why Chrisman’s account might be preferable to Brandom’s, consider the following two observations. Firstly, note that if Brandom is right about the function of logical vocabulary, it seems that we can already make explicit the goodness of practical inferences by use of conditionals such as ‘If spending more time with my nephews makes them

unlikely to tell the whole story about moral vocabulary. For, note that these metasemantic considerations on ‘ought’ say nothing about evaluative notions such as ‘good’, ‘desirable’ or ‘bad’. Now, this would not be too alarming if we had good reason to expect these evaluative notions to be semantically reducible to deontic operators in some way. However, as Chrisman (2016: 213) himself appreciates, no such reasons are forthcoming. Rather, since his account of ‘ought’ appeals to *best* possible worlds, it *presupposes* moral orderings which evaluate worlds along a scale of being morally good or desirable and thus cannot be used to explicate the meaning of evaluative notions. Accordingly, given the semantic irreducibility of evaluative to deontic notions, even if relaxed realists adopted Chrisman’s proposal about ‘ought’ they would need to do more in order to provide a comprehensive account of moral vocabulary that also includes evaluative terms.²¹

Accordingly, we need to develop an account of evaluative moral notions in addition to that of deontic moral operators. To make a start on this project, let me return to an idea Brandom utters briefly after suggesting that moral vocabulary makes explicit material proprieties of practical reasoning. More precisely, he (2000: 89-90) specifies that the “idea is that ... broadly normative or evaluative vocabulary ... is used to make explicit in assertible, propositional form the endorsement of a *pattern* of material practical inferences.”

It is this idea of a ‘pattern’ that interests me. Now, what Brandom appears to have in mind when talking about a pattern of inferences is the specific structure of attributed commitments and entitlements that we generally associate with a particular class of claims. For instance, unlike the pattern pertaining to prudential normative claims, where entitlement to commitments depends on the preferences of those to which the commitments are attributed, moral claims concern a commitment/entitlement structure which is such that the move

Donating money alleviates poverty.

∴ I shall donate money.

is entitlement-preserving for anyone, irrespective of their preferences or social status. This observation is valid and helpful, and it should certainly be combined with what I say below. But it is not this observation which captures most of my interest. Rather, I believe

happy, then I shall spend more time with them’. But if the task of explicating the material propriety of practical inferences can be discharged by logical terms, it remains unclear why we would need to introduce yet another vocabulary in the shape of the deontic ‘ought’ to perform the same function with regard to language exit transitions. Secondly, note that we often encounter uses of ‘ought’ in contexts that do not concern language exit transitions, which Brandom’s account seems unable to capture. In contrast, Chrisman’s suggestion no longer focuses exclusively on language exit transitions and is thus able to account for the use of ‘ought’ in such non-moral contexts, as in ‘The match ought to light if struck’. Since I am interested only in the moral use of ‘ought’, I will ignore such non-moral uses here. Similarly, for the sake of simplification I will ignore the distinction between agentive uses of ‘ought’, which embed practitioners, and non-agentive uses, which embed propositions (Chrisman 2016; ch. 5).

²¹ Interestingly, Chrisman (2016: 214) does not seek to extend the metaconceptual approach to evaluative terms, but rather hints at a descriptivist-relativist account: “Each of these evaluations is relative to one of these standards. Claims that something is good (in some way) could then be viewed as perfectly naturalistic descriptions of the verdicts of the relevant standard. ... So in this way, we might be descriptivist relativists about evaluative terms such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ while allowing that it is often a normative question (and so not a descriptive matter) which standard ought to be taken into account in some particular deliberation.” In contrast, I seek to be a metaconceptualist both about evaluative and deontic vocabulary.

that thinking about *patterns* of inferences opens up valuable room that we can exploit for developing a firmer grip on the function of evaluative moral vocabulary, such that evaluative terms are employed not only for making certain inferential patterns explicit, but also for *explaining* and *regulating* them.

4.2 Evaluative terms and explaining inferential patterns

To understand what I have in mind, it is helpful to start with an example of another context which, albeit not fully congruent, still shows important parallels to the function I will assign to moral evaluative vocabulary. Have a look at the following inference:

$$\frac{\text{I dropped the pen.}}{\therefore \text{The pen will fall down.}}$$

Most of us certainly believe that this inference constitutes a good move within theoretical reasoning. Inferentialists agree: According to them, this is an example of a materially good inference, in that inferring its consequent from its antecedent is generally a good move to make, although the inference is not formally correct due to its logical form.

Next, consider the claim ‘The gravity of the earth draws the pen to its centre.’ This claim introduces a new term: ‘gravity’. What is its function? It seems clear that we do not use this term merely to make explicit that this inference is good. Rather, introducing it enables us to *explain why* it is good: Employing the term ‘gravity’ enables us to explain why commitment to ‘I dropped the pen’ is indeed a reason to commit myself also to ‘The pen will fall down’.

‘Gravity’ is, of course, a theoretical term. As such, it differs from observation terms such as ‘red’ in two respects (see Brandom 2002). Firstly, in contrast to observation reports such as ‘This bike is red’, theoretical claims do not express non-inferentially triggered responses to an environmental circumstance and thus are not introduced on the basis of language entry transitions.²² Secondly, whereas observation reports are non-inferentially default-justified, theoretical claims are only inferentially justified, in that “[t]heoretical concepts are ones we can only be entitled to apply as the conclusions of inferences, while concepts of observables also have noninferential uses” (Brandom 2002: 362). That is, whilst as a reliable reporter of colours I am entitled to utter ‘This bike is red’ non-inferentially upon looking at the bike, I am entitled to use the term ‘gravity’ only inferentially, say by employing Newton’s theory of gravitation or Einstein’s general theory of relativity. Of course, the same goes for other theoretical terms: I am entitled to use the term ‘temperature’ within kinetic theory, say, the term ‘fitness’ within evolutionary biological theory, the term ‘valence electron’ by employing atomic theory, etc. Now, once introduced, theoretical terms can also acquire observational uses. For instance, if we learn to develop discriminative reporting dispositions to respond non-inferentially to things such as electrons and protons, say, we can use these terms non-inferentially by uttering ‘There goes a proton’ when observing a vapour trail in a cloud chamber. Hence, as inferentialists never tire of stressing, the observational/theoretical distinction is methodological, not ontological. Still, theoretical terms start life not on the basis of language entry transitions, but are introduced to the inferential web as part of theories that aim to explain why certain inferences are indeed good.

I suggest that we should tell a very similar story about evaluative moral vocabulary. To start with, look again at a language exit transition such as:

²² Compare also Carnap (1966: 230) on the introduction of theoretical terms.

Babysitting the boys will help my sister.

∴ I shall babysit the boys.

Again, many of us would think that this is a good inference: If you are committed to its antecedent, it is also defensible to enter the commitment expressed by its consequent. Next, consider the claim ‘Helping my sister is morally good’, which introduces the new term ‘morally good’. In which relation does this claim about moral goodness stand to the inference above? Again, using this new term ‘morally good’ does not simply appear to explicate that this inference is good—arguably, ‘I ought to babysit the boys’ already takes care of that job. Rather, it appears to *explain why* this is a good move, i.e. why my commitment to ‘Babysitting the boys will help my sister’ does indeed provide a reason to enter the commitment that I shall babysit the boys.

Note that we can extend this parallel between evaluative moral terms and theoretical vocabulary further by observing that as with the latter, the former also differs from observational vocabulary in two respects. Firstly, moral claims do not express non-inferentially triggered responses to an environmental circumstance: They are not introduced on the basis of language entry transitions. Secondly, a claim such as ‘Helping my sister is morally good’ is not non-inferentially default-justified. That is, when asked about my entitlement to this claim, it is not normally sufficient to respond simply by saying ‘I saw it’, or ‘I felt it’. Rather, I must justify this claim inferentially, say by employing a moral principle which explains, for instance, that helping is good, that it is so because it generates the most happiness, that something’s being good counts in favour of bringing it about, etc. Again, this does not deny that we can learn how to use evaluative moral vocabulary observationally, namely by developing discriminative reporting dispositions such that I assert ‘This is morally good!’ upon seeing someone jump into the lake to save a drowning child, say. Nonetheless, in contrast to observational vocabulary, moral terms are not introduced to language on the basis of such non-inferentially triggered responses, but enter the inferential web as part of moral theories that aim to explain why certain²³ language exit moves are indeed good.

This, then, is the rough idea. Next, we need to produce a more precise rendering.

5 The metaconceptual function of evaluative moral terms

What exactly is involved in having the function to explain the goodness of certain language exit moves? Again, I will approach this question by considering how our relaxed commitments about moral discourse constrain the response that we might want to give. More precisely: Whichever account of explanatory function we might adopt, it must not engender any substantively metaphysical commitments about moral properties and our access to them.

Most obviously, this implies that in our context, explanation cannot amount to causal explanation: Since relaxed realists do not ascribe causal efficacy to moral

²³ The insertion of ‘certain’ is important, as I do *not* claim that evaluative moral vocabulary explains *all* language exit transitions. For instance, it is not used to explain the exit move from ‘This is my favourite cake’ to ‘I shall eat a piece of this cake’. Rather, evaluative moral vocabulary is to be related with language exit moves that we would generally subsume under moral discourse. Following Brandom’s interpretation of inferential patterns, these might be those language exits which are justified or required irrespective of preferences and social roles. Other normative vocabulary—prudential, aesthetic, etc.—will take care of other patterns of language exits.

properties, providing an explanation cannot be to do with identifying cause and effect. As the goodness of inferential moves is clearly not a causal matter anyway, this is just as well. It is equally as clear that our take on explanatory function cannot involve any direct or indirect appeal to non-inferentially triggered perceptions of moral properties: Our discussion of language entry moves has already explained why any such approach is incompatible with relaxing about moral properties. Similarly, relaxed realists cannot surf the recent wave of taking explanation to concern the identification of metaphysically heavyweight grounding relations: Whilst this approach to explanation has recently garnered much support amongst metaethicists,²⁴ conceiving of explanatory projects as substantively metaphysical enquiries into the different ‘layers’ in which reality is said to come obviously stands in conflict with a relaxed take on moral properties.

Here, then, is what relaxed realists should say instead: To hold that an evaluative term such as ‘good’ has the function to explain the legitimacy of language exit transitions, is to introduce it within a framework of moral theories which systematises, structures and regulates language exit transitions in such a way as to identify an inferential pattern that contains only good language exit moves. There are three components to this approach. The first relates to an inferentialist account of explanatory notions, the second concerns the role of moral theories within explanation and the third pertains to the ascription of explanatory functions to linguistic terms.

Starting with the first component, inferentialism about explanatory notions such as ‘explains’ and ‘is explanatory’ is regrettably not as yet particularly well developed.²⁵ Still, using the inferentialist approach to causal vocabulary as our foil, it is most natural to suggest that taking moral goodness to explain the legitimacy of language exit transitions, is to take ‘good’ to stand in a specific pattern of inferential relations that is characterised by certain structural features (Millson et al. 2018). For instance, this pattern will show a certain kind of intransitivity, in that it will include ‘If helping is morally good, then helping my sister will be justified’, but not ‘If helping is justified, then helping my sister is morally good’. Similarly, explanatory inferences will be marked by irreflexivity and premise consistency, ruling out inferences such as ‘If helping is justified, then it is justified’ and ‘If helping is morally good and it is morally bad, helping is justified’. They will impose a minimality constraint on explanatory premises, such that if ‘Helping my sister is morally good’ is said to explain the legitimacy of helping, it cannot to be replaced by weaker premises, as for instance ‘Helping my sister is morally good and I will profit financially’. This pattern will show a certain degree of stability by allowing for counterfactual

²⁴ For a small sample, compare Enoch (2019), Berker (2018a, 2018b), deRosset (2013), Fine (2012), Rosen (2010). Talking about metaphysical grounding relations raises the question in which way grounding explanations really are substantively metaphysical. I will not enter into this discussion here. Rather, what I am arguing is that *if* we grant that there is a metaphysically heavyweight reading of grounding relations, it is clear that a relaxed realist cannot understand explanation by appeal to such relations.

²⁵ Brandom (1994, 2015) and Sellars (1957) focus more on causal rather than explanatory notions. To my knowledge, Millson (2018) et al. develop the most comprehensive take on explanatory notions by presenting a logical calculus that provides introduction and elimination rules for ‘best explains’. I will, therefore, adopt their suggestions with regard to explanatory notions here. The following considerations also draw on Sellars (1956, 1957), Brandom (2008: 31) and Carnap (1966: 248, 254). Compare also Brandom’s (2000: 67) remark that “[p]erhaps, meanings are to use as theoretical entities are to the observable ones whose antics they are postulated to explain.” Compare also González de Prado Salas et al. (2017) for an inferentialist take on inductive reasoning.

inferences such as ‘If helping my sister were morally good, I would be justified in helping’, whilst at the same time treating such inferences as defeasible, say in cases where the premise is strengthened to ‘Helping my sister is morally good and by not helping, I could save my neighbour’s life’. In a nutshell, then, taking goodness to be explanatory, is to endorse an inferential pattern in which ‘good’ stands that reflects our explanatory practices which are characterised by certain structural features. Introducing notions such as ‘explains’ and ‘is explanatory’ makes this specific inferential pattern explicit.

How come that ‘good’ stands in this inferential pattern? This is where the second component enters the scene in the shape of moral theories, as it is they that bring structure to the vast array of possible exits that we might take from the language game. To elaborate, assume that we reason from ‘Babysitting the boys will help my sister’ to ‘I shall babysit the boys’, from ‘I promised granny that I will visit her’ to ‘I shall visit granny’, from ‘Taking the money will damage others but benefit myself’ to ‘I shall take the money’, from ‘Telling a lie will prevent harm’ to ‘I shall tell a lie’, etc.²⁶ As we have said above, we can explicate the inferential proprieties of these exit moves by stating that I ought to babysit the boys, to visit my granny, to take the money, or to lie respectively. What we cannot do, is to establish any pattern, or structure, within these inferential moves. For this, we need moral theories, which seek to systematise and structure language exit transitions by identifying what good language exit moves share and what bad ones lack. These moral theories will do so by postulating rules or laws which ideally²⁷ do not merely provide generalisations—as in ‘All instances of helping are good’—but which unify exit moves, say by specifying that if ϕ -ing generates the most happiness, ϕ -ing is good. They will explain that goodness is such that *ceteris paribus*, ϕ -ing’s being good justifies ϕ -ing, explicate the relationship between goodness, other moral properties and rationality, and spell out what needs to hold for us to be entitled to our moral commitments. In short, then, by codifying language exit moves on the basis of moral principles about moral goodness, moral theories filter good language exits from bad ones and extrapolate beyond the moves we are making by determining which potential language exits would be good and which would not.

As will be obvious, this systematisation process is undertaken from within moral discourse. That is, in line with the method of reflective equilibrium that relaxed realists defend within moral epistemology (Scanlon 2014), it requires us to engage in a process of rational reflection based on empirical information until we—hopefully²⁸—reach a point of reflective equilibrium in which a moral theory systematically identifies morally

²⁶ This is not to deny that once we are in possession of evaluative terms, we can also use these terms to explicate the legitimacy of transitions from doxastic commitments, such as ‘Donald harmed many people’, to further normative commitments, such as ‘Punishing Donald is appropriate’. I thank Matthew Chrisman for pressing me on this point and owe this example to him.

²⁷ Whether unification can be achieved through a single moral theory, or whether Rossian *prima facie* moral principles are the best we can hope for, is a question for ethics to answer. The utilitarian example that I suggest here is no more than that: an example of what unification could involve. See Carnap (1966: 228) on the difference between generalising laws and unifying laws.

²⁸ As my insertion of ‘hopefully’ indicates, this process is not guaranteed to be successful: We might not reach such a reflective state. However, this is no problem for the relaxed account since there is no inconsistency in holding that although it is the function of moral vocabulary to explain the goodness of language exit transitions, no such explanation is forthcoming. Accordingly, the relaxed metasemantic account of evaluative terms is compatible with an error theory. This is as it should be: Whether or not evaluative terms successfully discharge their explanatory function is a substantive moral question, not a metasemantic one.

relevant considerations which can form the antecedents of good language exit transitions. As should also be obvious from a relaxed perspective, the moral nature of this organisation exercise is not a drawback, but a boon: After all, conceiving of systematisation as a discourse-internal process dovetails perfectly with the relaxed approach to morality.

This brings us to the third and final component of taking moral evaluative vocabulary to be explanatory: Declaring that it is the function of evaluative terms such as ‘good’ to explain the legitimacy of certain language exit transitions, is to assert that evaluative properties such as goodness are introduced within moral theories in order to systematise, codify, unify and structure proprieties of use with regard to language exit moves.

Note that this take on a vocabulary’s explanatory function is not the unique preserve of evaluative notions. Rather, we can also tell a parallel story about other explanatory notions, such as the theoretical terms ‘gravity’ or ‘valence electron’. That is, taking gravity or valence electrons to explain certain observations, is to take ‘gravity’ and ‘valence electron’ respectively to stand in a specific pattern of inferential relations that shows certain structural features which are characteristic of explanatory practice; this pattern is, in turn, established on the basis of scientific theories which postulate gravity and valence electrons in order to systematise observations; and to ascribe an explanatory function to theoretical notions such as ‘gravity’ and ‘valence electron’ is to hold that “theoretical entities [are] postulated to explain, or at least to codify, proprieties of use” relating to language entry transitions (Brandom 2008: 31). Accordingly, just as moral evaluative terms are introduced to language in order to structure certain language exit transitions, theoretical terms are introduced to language so as to systematise certain language entry transitions.

Note also the instructive parallel that can be drawn between this inferentialist approach to evaluative notions and Scanlon’s (1998: ch. 3) take on value in *What We Owe to Each Other*.²⁹ According to Scanlon, someone who values ‘fanship’, say, will be someone who believes that a new film being released in which his heroine stars provides a good reason to see the film; that his heroine walking the red carpet in Leicester Square is a good reason to travel to London; that the autograph on the piece of paper being hers is a good reason to hang the paper on the wall, etc. “To claim that [fanship] is valuable, [then], is to claim that all these reasons are good reasons” (Scanlon 1998: 90). As such, one way to construe Scanlon’s account of evaluations, is to conceive of them as *bundles of reason-giving relations*. Suggesting that the function of evaluative notions is to systematise, codify and structure moves from doxastic commitments—such as about films coming out, someone’s whereabouts or the origin of some autograph—to actions is, in fact, a further form of bundling.

Why do we need to systematise language exits and entries respectively? Put differently, why do we need vocabularies that fulfil these specific functions? Remember that we are playing a game of giving and asking for reasons. As such, a crucial part of this game consists in identifying which fact really constitutes a reason for entering a specific commitment—inferentially put, which assertion legitimately features as the premise of an inference—and which considerations merely *appear* to do so. By organising language inputs and language exits, scientific and moral theories serve this purpose. On the theoretical side, this will lead to better predictions about what we are going to observe; on the moral side, it will lead to better guidance regarding which actions to perform.

²⁹ I am heavily indebted to François Schroeter for the observations in this paragraph. As I indicate in fn. 35, though, my proposal on evaluative terms need not be combined with a buck-passing account of value, but is neutral to it.

But if evaluative moral and theoretical terms are linguistic instruments for organising language exit and language entry moves into some sort of pattern, is it not the case that this metasemantic account implies that we merely talk *as if* there was goodness and *as if* there were gravity and electrons? Put differently, does this metasemantics not abandon realism in favour of instrumentalism? No. For, note that against a relaxed, inferentialist background, the question ‘Does goodness (does gravity) really exist?’ can be answered only in one way, namely by considering from *within* moral (scientific) discourse whether or not a moral (scientific) theory succeeds in unifying inferential patterns such that we arrive at a better understanding of what to do (predictions of what we will observe).³⁰ If we answer in the positive, this settles the question that goodness (gravity) exists—there simply is no further question as to whether or not goodness (gravity) *really* exists.

Does assimilating our metasemantic story of moral evaluative notions to theoretical terms entail that we must relax about theoretical entities in the same way as we relax about moral properties? Not necessarily. Rather, it could be suggested that the nature of ontological commitment varies with the kind of transitions that a vocabulary organises. For instance, it would not be too implausible to argue that since observations constrain our language game in a way that language exits do not, any vocabulary that structures language entries should be associated with a more heavyweight understanding of metaphysical commitment than vocabularies that concern language exits. Whether or not we should aim at such a differentiation of ontological commitment is a question which I do not seek to answer here. Rather, what is important for my purposes is that even if we wanted to attribute a more heavyweight form of ontological commitment to explanatory vocabularies that relate to language entries, no such heavyweight commitment is accrued by attributing an explanatory function to moral evaluative vocabulary. The metasemantic account developed here thus remains fully compatible with relaxing about moral properties.

6 Inferentialism’s normativity: Not a bug, but a feature

To recap, I have argued that relaxed realists’ own minimalist commitments drive them towards inferentialist metaconceptualism such that they should attribute a metaconceptual function to moral vocabulary that relates to language exit transitions. With regard to moral evaluative terms, I have suggested further that this function concerns the explanation of language exit transitions’ inferential proprieties. And by understanding explanatory function in inferentialist terms, according to which evaluative notions are tools employed within a discourse-internal systematisation exercise, we have seen that ascribing this function to evaluative terms does not create any substantive metaphysical commitments about moral properties. This metasemantic account of evaluative notions, then, fits perfectly with the relaxed take on moral discourse.

At the same time, it is striking that our inferentialist metasemantics itself constantly uses normative notions when elucidating the meaning of moral terms: It concerns

³⁰ Compare Carnap’s (1966: 256) remarks on realism and instrumentalism: “My own view ... is that the conflict between the two approaches is essentially linguistic. ... To say that a theory is a reliable instrument ... is essentially the same as saying that the theory is true and that the theoretical, unobservable entities it speaks about exist. Thus, there is no incompatibility between the thesis of the instrumentalist and that of the realist. At least, there is no incompatibility so long as the former avoids such negative assertions, as ‘... but the theory does not consist of sentences which are either true or false, and the atoms, electrons, and the like do not really exist.’”

inferential *proprieties* and thus the *goodness* of material inferences, it appeals to our *entitlements* to entertain *commitments* and refers to the *reasons* we have to enter into further commitments. As I have indicated earlier, inferentialism is an irreducibly normative theory of meaning: it spells out meaning-attributions from within normative practices. Is this a problem for relaxed realism?

We might think so if we adopted a certain criterion of ontological commitment, according to which employment of a vocabulary counts as engendering metaphysically heavyweight implications if the metasemantic story we want to tell about it itself uses this very vocabulary. For instance, if our metasemantic account of ‘tree’ needed to refer to trees, or that of ‘red’ to redness, this criterion would entail that we are committed to the existence of trees and redness in some metaphysically substantive sense. Similarly, using normative notions such as ‘goodness’, ‘reason’ or ‘entitlement’ in our metasemantic story about moral terms would also imply metaphysically heavyweight commitment to the existence of goodness, reasons, or the property of being entitled. But if so, inferentialism’s irreducible normativity *would* contradict relaxing about moral properties after all.

This criterion takes inspiration from attempts to distinguish representationalist from non-representationalist metasemantics.³¹ Yet, it should be rejected.

To see why, remember that according to inferentialists, we cannot help but draw on normative vocabulary in order to provide an adequate account of our meaning-attributing practices. Put differently, any description of these practices which proceeds in purely non-normative terms—say by explaining that we are disposed to use terms in a certain way, rather than being committed and entitled to do so—is inadequate, or so the inferentialist tells us. In a nutshell, then, inferentialists do not aim to present a reductive, non-normative account of meaning-attributions. However, as Chrisman (2016: ch. 7.2) helpfully stresses, whilst any appropriate account of meaning-attributing practices must, therefore, inevitably be couched in normative terms such as ‘reason’, ‘inferential propriety’, ‘commitment’ and ‘entitlement’, *none* of these notions receives a metasemantic analysis that would rely on our disposition to respond to reasons, the goodness of inferences, or properties of commitment and entitlement in any metaphysically committing way. Rather, all of these terms are given a metaconceptual treatment along the lines presented above: ‘Ought’ will be regarded as a deontic operator, ‘good’ will be treated as a linguistic tool for systematisation, ‘reason’ could also be understood as performing systematisation work within normative theories, ‘entitlement’ might be regarded as a metaconceptual device that makes certain aspects of inferential proprieties explicit, etc.³² But if all of these

³¹ Compare: “You will be a pragmatist about an area of discourse if you pose a Carnapian external question ... [a]nd then you offer an account of what we are up to in going in for this discourse, and the account eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse ...” (Blackburn 2013: 75). Williams (2013: 136) can also be read along those lines when conceiving of our metasemantic account of the term ‘true’ as “ontologically conservative” because the “use of ‘true’ is characterised without reference to the property of truth”, although other passages suggest that he links ontological non-conservativeness with language entry transitions. See Tiefensee (2016) for further discussion.

³² As these sketchy suggestions show, none of these normative notions will need to be regarded as fundamental. Rather, it is most likely that we can explain ‘reason’ in terms of good inferences, which we can explain in terms of commitment and entitlement, which we can explain in terms of reasons, ... Consequently, just as it is impossible to reduce these normative notions to non-normative concepts, it might be impossible to reduce the plethora of normative terms to one, fundamental normative notion. This, though, is a problem neither for inferentialists nor relaxed realists.

normative notions are invariably explained on the basis of purely metaconceptual and explicative considerations, none of which presuppose any metaphysically substantive conception of moral properties, then simply using these notions within our metalanguage cannot plausibly conjure up such substantive metaphysical implications. Put differently then, it is not the sheer *use* of notions in our metasemantics that matters for substantive metaphysical commitment; it is the *kind* of metasemantic explanation that these notions receive which counts. Consequently, inferentialism's normativity poses no threat to relaxed realism. Rather, it constitutes a boon: By conceiving of meaning itself in terms of inferential proprieties, understanding normative notions as metaconceptual devices that explicate and structure these proprieties is only a small step.

Accordingly, if my suggestions are successful, we now know what it means to provide one type of relaxed metasemantics for moral vocabulary: To be a relaxed realist about moral properties, is to be an inferentialist metaconceptualist about moral concepts.

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