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Metasemantics, Moral Realism and Moral Doctrines

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Abstract In this paper, I consider the relationship between Matthew Kramer’s moral realism as a moral doctrine and expressivism, understood as a distinctly non-representationalist metasemantics of moral vocabulary. More precisely, I will argue that Kramer is right in stating that moral realism as a moral doctrine does not stand in conflict with expressivism. But I will also go further, by submitting that advocates of moral realism as a moral doctrine *must* be expressivists in some shape or form. Accordingly, if you do not want to be an expressivist, you cannot defend moral realism as a moral doctrine. Similarly, if you want moral realism to compete with expressivism, you cannot accept Kramer’s take on moral realism either. Hence, moral realism as a moral doctrine stands and falls with expressivism, or so I shall argue.

Keywords Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine • Metasemantics • Expressivism • Inferentialism

1 Introduction

When I first read Matthew Kramer’s *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine* and the works of kindred spirits, I was rather blown away. Could it be that when thinking about metaethical issues, such as the existence of moral facts, the possibility of moral knowledge, the action-guiding character of moral judgements and the meaning of moral concepts, I had been thinking about *moral* issues all along? Kramer (2009: 5) certainly appeared to suggest as much when explaining that “there is no fundamental divide between the meta-ethical and the ethical. Meta-ethical theses are distinctive in the specific issues that they address, ... but we should not make the mistake of thinking that their distinctiveness places them outside the domain of substantive ethical principles.”

After a second read, the overall picture looked rather different. This revealed that in declaring metaethical positions to be moral doctrines, Kramer (2009: 12) understood metaethics as pertaining predominantly to “morality *tout court*” which, in turn, refers “to the whole array of correct ethical/moral standards that truly determine the ethical/moral consequences of people’s conduct, and to the diverse categories and properties associated with those standards.” Understood as narrowly as this, I was certainly happy to agree with Kramer’s moral interpretation of metaethics. Still, two observations puzzled me. Firstly, it was obvious that ‘metaethics’ had traditionally been given a much wider reading

than one that would limit its remit to morality's objectivity. That is, rather than being exhausted by questions about the existence of moral facts, their nature and knowability, investigations into the meaning and function of moral vocabulary, the mental states expressed by moral judgements and the link between these judgements and motivation, say, have also commonly been regarded as classic examples of metaethical enquiry. But if Kramer's moral interpretation of metaethics concerned only theses about morality's objectivity, what about the status of these further paradigmatically metaethical enquiries? Would Kramer intend that they too must be regarded as moral investigations, or was his moral interpretation of metaethics supposed to leave them untouched? The second observation registered what appeared to be a striking overlap between moral realism as a moral doctrine on the one hand and sophisticated expressivism on the other. After all, philosophers such as Simon Blackburn (1998) and Allan Gibbard (2003) too have long maintained that defending the existence of moral facts, their mind-independence and knowability amounts to putting forward moral positions which, as *participants* of moral discourse, they are also happy to endorse. As they also never tire of stressing, though, none of this is supposed to stand in any conflict with their expressivism. But if Blackburn, Gibbard and Kramer agree on the moral interpretation of theses about morality's objectivity, how (if at all) do their views differ?

A third read, this time featuring one of Kramer's later papers, shed light on both sources of puzzlement. In *There's Nothing Quasi About Quasi-Realism*, Kramer distinguishes more clearly between Blackburn's and Gibbard's expressivism, by which he (2017: 198) understands an account of the pragmatics of moral discourse, and what he calls their quasi-realism, which he takes to cover the moral defence of morality's objectivity. Expressivism, Kramer now clarifies, does *not* amount to a moral doctrine, but remains to be understood as a non-moral, philosophical position. More precisely:

[I]f the field of meta-ethics is understood more expansively than I have construed it when I have proclaimed that all meta-ethical doctrines are substantive ethical doctrines [namely, as pertaining only to propositions about the existence, nature or objectivity of moral principles and properties], and specifically if that field is understood to include endeavors such as Blackburnian expressivism, then those endeavors should continue as they have unfolded hitherto (Kramer 2017: 208).

In contrast, quasi-realism as Kramer understands it *just is* moral realism as a moral doctrine, or so he (2017: 204) asserts: "That is, it affirms the objectivity of morality in several different senses, and it does so entirely on moral grounds." Accordingly, since quasi-realism is realism as a moral doctrine, and since quasi-realism is fully compatible with expressivism, expressivist endeavours "are entirely consistent with moral realism as a moral doctrine, and they complement it nicely" (Kramer 2017: 208).

Again, this changed the overall picture significantly. When first reading about moral realism as a moral doctrine I, like many others, had conceived of it as aiming to add a *new* position to the metaethical landscape that would offer an *alternative* to the existing metaethical accounts of metaphysically substantive moral realism and expressivism. After all, Kramer and like-minded philosophers appeared to spend considerable time opposing not only any metaphysically substantive approach to moral discourse, but also

expressivism and its distinctive theses about moral judgement.¹ Now I understood that moral realism as a moral doctrine did not even seek to address the same questions as expressivism. Far from standing in competition with it, then, moral realism as a moral doctrine was to be ‘complemented nicely’ by expressivism.

But if so, what exactly *is* the relationship between moral realism as a moral doctrine and expressivism? And in which way, if any, does moral realism as a moral doctrine add *new* considerations to metaethical debate, or any other debate for that matter? Providing responses to both questions will be the objective of this paper. When doing so, I will argue that Kramer is right in stating that moral realism as a moral doctrine does not stand in conflict with expressivism. But I will also go further, by submitting that advocates of moral realism as a moral doctrine *must* be expressivists in some shape or form. I will suggest that moral realism as a moral doctrine does have new arguments to offer, but that these arguments neither pertain to metaethical enquiries as undertaken by expressivism and metaphysically substantive moral realism, nor to substantive first-order ethics as traditionally pursued by utilitarians and Kantians, say. Indeed, I will argue that moral realism as a moral doctrine *cannot* offer any arguments in the context of metaethical enquiries as tackled by expressivism, such that moral realism would disappear from this field of research altogether if Kramer’s take on moral realism were correct and that of metaphysically substantive realists were wrong. Accordingly, if you do not want to be an expressivist, you cannot defend moral realism as a moral doctrine. Similarly, if you want moral realism to be a metaethical competitor of expressivism’s, you cannot accept Kramer’s take on moral realism either. Moral realism as a moral doctrine stands and falls with expressivism, or so I shall argue.

In what follows, I will concur with many of Kramer’s points. With regard to others, I will confess to uncertainty about whether or not Kramer and I are in agreement. And concerning others, I will simply disagree. As such, I will start in §2 by specifying how I understand expressivism and moral realism as a moral doctrine. Whilst I will predominantly follow Kramer’s description of the latter, I will disagree with him about the former’s characterisation by suggesting that expressivism should not be located within pragmatics, but metasemantics. The term ‘quasi-realism’, in turn, I will abandon altogether. How moral realism as a moral doctrine relates to metasemantic projects and why it needs to be combined with expressivism will then be explained in §3. Discussion of what follows from this result for the development and success of moral realism as a moral doctrine and the new insights it can offer rounds off the paper in §4.

Importantly, the conclusions I will draw are not limited to Kramer’s specific take on moral realism as a moral doctrine. Rather, they apply to all forms of moral realism which defend a minimalist, discourse-internal approach to moral facts and properties.² To pay

¹ See Kramer (2009: ch. 8), Dworkin (1996: 108-112, 2011: ch. 3), Scanlon (2014: ch. 3), Parfit (2011: ch. 28).

² As such, this includes the positions of Nagel (1986), Scanlon (2014), Parfit (2011) and Dworkin (1996, 2011). For metaphysically substantive realism, see Brink (1989), Shafer-Landau (2003) and Enoch (2011) and Wedgwood (2007). What I will call ‘minimalist’ moral realism also goes under the heading of relaxed realism, quietism, or even anti-realist cognitivism.

heed to this observation—and since ‘moral realism as a moral doctrine’ is, after all, quite a bit of a mouthful—I will from now on refer to this family of approaches as ‘minimalist moral realism’.

2 Expressivism and minimalist moral realism

Let me begin, then, by explicating how I understand the two protagonists of this paper, minimalist moral realism and expressivism. Since I believe that employment of these two notions enables us to express everything that we want to say in this debate, I will drop ‘quasi-realism’ as a notion altogether. The term ‘quasi’ has been the source of many misunderstandings in the past; hence, there is no need to invite further unnecessary confusion by employing it in this paper.

Minimalist moral realism, in turn, will be taken to be characterised by its endorsement of two central theses. Firstly, it holds that questions pertaining to the existence of moral facts and properties, their nature and knowability do not concern non-moral, discourse-external queries, but moral, discourse-internal matters. As such, it adamantly rejects substantively metaphysical approaches to moral discourse which seek to examine the existence of moral truths and facts, their nature and knowability by appealing to general metaphysical criteria such as causal efficacy, explanatory potency or deliberative indispensability, say. Rather, all propositions about morality’s objectivity are moral themselves, or so minimalist moral realists submit: They do not amount to propositions which we bring forth from outside moral discourse about the moral domain, but to moral propositions which are to be defended from within moral discourse on grounds of moral arguments.

As Kramer (2017) rightly indicates, adopting minimalist conceptions of truth, reference, fact, representation and properties plays a crucial role in this moral interpretation of morality’s objectivity, and it is not hard to see why.³ For, if facts are no more than true statements, as minimalists maintain, and if assigning truth to a statement is conceptually equivalent to asserting this very statement, then holding there to be a moral fact that lying to the electorate is wrong simply amounts to making the *moral* assertion that lying to the electorate is wrong. Similarly, if properties are the shadows of predicates, then all it takes for the moral property of wrongness to exist is that a moral claim featuring the predicate ‘wrong’ is true. And if all that is required for a statement purportedly to represent some moral fact is for it to have assertoric form and ascribe a moral predicate to some object, moral statements are clearly representational. As such, minimalism removes any metaphysical overtones from notions such as truth, fact, representation or property by regarding them not as metaphysically heavyweight concepts, but as useful devices that we

³ Things are not quite as simple as I make out here, as I explain in Tiefensee (forthcoming). Still, as far as I am aware, all minimalist moral realists adopt minimalism about truth in some shape or form. For instance, see Scanlon (2014: 43), Parfit (2011: 756, n. 295), Kramer (2009: 261). Dworkin’s (2011: 173) position is somewhat less clear, although his take on truth might still be categorised as non-representationalist.

employ in language to *do* certain things that would not be possible without them. Consequently, applying these notions in moral contexts also enables us to do something *within* moral discourse, rather than taking us outside it by leading us to metaphysically substantive spheres. Unsurprisingly then, minimalism about semantic notions is the natural bed-fellow of minimalist moral realism.

However, minimalist moral realists do not simply assert that propositions about morality's objectivity are moral. Rather, as part of their second thesis, they also endorse and defend *specific* propositions about moral objectivity. As such, they declare that there are moral facts and properties, that these facts and properties are mind-independent, that we have epistemic access to them and do indeed have knowledge about certain moral facts, that (most) moral questions receive determinately correct moral answers, that we can err about which moral answers are correct, and so on. Accordingly, whereas minimalist moral realism's first thesis concerns the categorisation of propositions about moral objectivity as moral, its second component targets the actual vindication of moral objectivity from within moral discourse.

Note that thus defined, moral realism's defence of morality's objectivity concerns predominantly moral metaphysics and moral epistemology. Kramer (2017: 204), in turn, would also want to add semantics to this list. Without arguing this point here, let me merely register my disagreement: Whilst certain aspects of moral terms' semantics—such as fixing the specific extension of 'right', say—do indeed concern moral matters, others—including the truth-aptitude and purportedly representational character of moral sentences—do not.⁴ Whenever I speak of morality's objectivity, I will, therefore, predominantly have moral metaphysics and moral epistemology in mind.

⁴ To provide no more than the slightest of hints about the reasons for my disagreement, let us start with truth-aptitude, which Kramer locates within the moral domain. Indeed, he (2017: 205) not only agrees with Dworkin that "the question whether moral judgments can be true or false is a substantive moral issue, not a distinct meta-ethical one", but also believes this position to be "uncontroversial" and that "Blackburn would certainly agree with [it]." I disagree and, I believe, so would Blackburn. Firstly, the truth-aptitude of moral statements—together with their assertoric, representational, descriptive character—is to be explained by metasemantics, not by moral theorising. That is, Blackburn's thoughts about the use and function of moral terms do not merely "[alert us] to the fact that the semantics of such discourse are (minimalistically) objective along the lines expounded by quasi-realism", as Kramer's (2017: 204, fn. 16) puts it, but provide a metasemantic *explanation* of this descriptive, assertoric character of moral sentences. Accordingly, when asked how it comes about that moral sentences have assertoric form and can be ascribed truth-values, Blackburn would not provide a moral response; rather, he would explain that moral sentences have this form because otherwise they could not realise their practical function. On the one hand, Kramer (2017: 204, fn. 16) appears to acknowledge as much when explaining that "[w]ere the semantics not objective in that fashion, moral discourse could not fulfill its central functions." On the other hand, I must admit that I struggle to square this acknowledgement with his moral interpretation of truth-aptitude. To offer a cautious diagnosis of this seeming mismatch, my hunch is that by locating expressivism within pragmatics, Kramer attributes to expressivism a more detached relationship with semantics than my metasemantic interpretation of expressivism would allow.

Turning away from the categorisation of truth-aptitude, it also appears implausible to hold that *all* components of semantics are moral. To use a particularly clear example, take a quick look at the semantics of 'ought'. Spelling out the general truth-conditions of ought-claims along the

Turning to our second protagonist in the guise of expressivism, then, three observations are particularly significant. The first concerns expressivism's general characterisation. Above, I have already hinted that contrary to traditional understandings, Kramer (2017: 200) suggests that expressivism should not be interpreted as providing a semantics of moral sentences, but as presenting an account of the pragmatics of moral discourse: "That is, instead of aiming to supply an exposition of what moral utterances mean, expressivism should be aiming to supply an exposition of what people do by engaging in such utterances and by articulating them in propositional forms. It should be endeavoring to chart what people achieve at practical levels by suffusing their interactions with moral judgments."

I agree that expressivism should not be understood as a semantic theory. However, although considerations about what moral vocabulary allows us to do play a key role in expressivist thinking, it should not be located within the field of pragmatics either. For, expressivism does not take the meaning of moral assertoric sentences as *given* and then considers how these sentences are used within our practices. Rather, it examines the use of moral utterances in our practices *in order to explain* what *constitutes* their meaning on the basis of these examinations.⁵ In short, expressivism is best understood as a *metasemantic* theory, which explains *in virtue of* what it is that moral sentences possess their specific meanings.⁶ As such, it does not suspend judgement on what constitutes meaning. Nor does it aim to attribute literal meanings to expressions, specify the referents of singular terms or make claims about a predicate's extension. Rather, it explains *why* expressions have these meanings, *why* names have their specific referents and *why* predicates have their particular extensions.⁷

lines of Kratzer-style (1981) deontic semantics is not a moral exercise; indeed, it is widely regarded to be a boon of this semantics that it provides the *same* general semantic formula *across* moral and non-moral uses of deontic operators such as 'ought'. Importantly, this does not mean that moral considerations are irrelevant for this semantic project. However, they enter the scene only when determining the truth-value of specific moral ought-sentences, namely by examining which moral ordering source is the correct one to plug into the general Kratzer-style semantic formula.

⁵ Again, I am not entirely sure if Kramer would disagree with this characterisation. On the one hand, some of Kramer's explanations sound as if he (2017: 204, fn. 16) came at least close to acknowledging an interpretation along these metasemantic lines. On the other, this metasemantic characterisation entails consequences which Kramer seemingly wants to reject. Firstly, these include implications for our understanding of moral sentences' truth-aptness and purportedly representational character as explained in footnote 4. Secondly and relatedly, they concern expressivism's quest for internal adequacy as explained below. Accordingly, I suspend judgement on whether or not Kramer would agree both with this metasemantic interpretation and the thoughts on internal adequacy as spelt out shortly.

⁶ This interpretation is quickly spreading. As a small sample, see Chrisman (2016, 2017), Köhler (2018), Ridge (2014), Schroeter/Schroeter (2018, 2019), Tiefensee (2019). For semantic interpretations of expressivism, see Rosen (1998), Schroeder (2008) and Wedgwood (2007).

⁷ Although metasemantic accounts do not answer semantic questions, they have to explain what makes it the case that sentences can be modelled along the lines of a specific semantic theory. *Pace* Kramer (2017: 199-200), this also means that placing expressivism outside of semantics does not eschew problems associated with the Frege-Geach problem once and for all, but relocates them to another level. For both points, see Schroeter/Schroeter (2019: 13).

What makes expressivism distinctive, in turn, is how it sets out to answer these questions. That is, in contrast to metasemantic representationalism, it does not seek to explain the meaning of moral expressions such as ‘good’ or ‘morally ought’ in terms of what these expressions represent in the world, say by specifying that ‘good’ means GOOD because it stands in a representational relation to goodness, whereas ‘morally ought’ obtains its meaning by representing some worldly ought-relation. Rather, expressivism pursues a distinctively *non*-representationalist approach, according to which these expressions have their specific meanings not because of what they *represent*, but because of how they are *used*. For instance, ideationalist expressivists, such as Blackburn (1998) and Gibbard (2003), will hold that moral sentences have their meanings in virtue of the mental states that these sentences are used to express, where these mental states are non-representational and motivational. In contrast, inferentialist expressivists, such as Brandom (1994) and Chrisman (2016), will suggest that moral sentences obtain their meanings by fulfilling a specific metaconceptual role within the game of giving and asking for reasons, which consists in making inferential relations explicit that would otherwise remain implicit in this game. Although my alliances lie with the latter, which of these expressivist accounts to adopt will not be important for my purposes. What will be important is, rather, that all expressivist accounts are forms of metasemantic non-representationalism, in that they all eschew appeal to notions such as representation, truth or reference when spelling out what constitutes moral terms’ meaning. Hence, whenever I speak of expressivism, I will use this term widely by taking it to encompass all accounts that share this non-representationalist approach to moral vocabulary.

This metasemantic characterisation also straightforwardly leads to our second observation about expressivism. As I have remarked in the introduction, expressivists agree with minimalist moral realists that questions pertaining to morality’s objectivity concern moral matters. However, they do not merely endorse this moral interpretation of morality’s objectivity; rather, they also provide its theoretical foundation.

To elaborate, as I said earlier, minimalist moral realism’s moral interpretation of moral objectivity crucially relies on minimalism about semantic notions, according to which the key to concepts such as ‘true’ or ‘refers’ does not lie in any metaphysical considerations about the property of truth or some metaphysically robust reference relation, but in what these concepts allow us to do within our language and practices. As many will have noted, though, this is exactly the answer an expressivist would give when asked about the meaning of ‘true’, ‘refers’, ‘represents’ and other semantic notions. Put differently, then, just as expressivism explains the meaning of moral notions in terms of the function that they assume within our language and practices, it also explains the meaning of semantic notions such as ‘true’ and ‘representation’ on the basis of their respective functions. Consequently, by providing a metasemantic analysis of semantic notions, expressivism delivers exactly that minimalist, non-representationalist account of truth, fact and representation which is pivotal in explaining why theses about moral metaphysics and epistemology are discourse-internal, moral claims. Metasemantic expressivism, then, embeds both minimalism and the moral interpretation of moral objectivity within the wider theoretical framework of non-representationalism.

The third and final observation notes that Kramer is right in stating that expressivism is not in the semantic business of fixing the extension of moral predicates such ‘good’, ‘ought’, ‘desirable’ or ‘virtuous’, and nor does it determine the particular truth-values of the sentences in which these words feature. Similarly, it is true that it is not one of expressivism’s objectives to defend minimalist moral realism’s second thesis, and thus the existence of mind-independent moral facts and their knowability. However, understanding expressivism as a *metasemantic* theory entails that expressivism *is* in the business of explaining not only how it comes about that moral expressions have the extensions that they have, but also on which basis truth-values can be ascribed to moral sentences and in which way these sentences can be said to be purportedly representational. Likewise, one of expressivism’s key objectives *is* to achieve internal adequacy, such that expressivism’s metasemantic position can be shown to have adequate resources to account for everything that features *within* moral practice (Gibbard 2003: 186). Since according to expressivism, propositions about moral truths and facts are discourse-internal, attaining internal adequacy thus also requires expressivism to account for moral truth and fact talk, claims about moral properties’ mind-independence, propositions about moral knowledge and other theses about morality’s objectivity.

As such, expressivism neither entails nor endorses the claim that there are moral truths. Rather, it restricts itself to explaining, say, that someone evaluating as true that lying to the electorate is morally wrong expresses disapproval towards lying to the electorate. Similarly, expressivism neither entails nor endorses the mind-independence of moral properties. Instead, it does not go beyond explaining, for instance, that anybody defending the mind-independence of moral properties expresses disapproval of a certain dispositional set-up and approval of an alternative one. Nor does expressivism entail or endorse the possibility of moral knowledge. All it does is to explain, for example, that anybody attributing moral knowledge to someone else attributes both commitment and entitlement to some moral proposition and is committed to this proposition herself. Accordingly, *qua* expressivists Blackburn, Gibbard, Chrisman or Brandom do not seek to vindicate the existence of moral truths and properties, their mind-independence or knowability. Rather, they only ever aim to vindicate internal features of moral practice by explaining what is involved in putting forward such claims about morality’s objectivity, whilst doing so on a fully non-representationalist basis.

Which immediate conclusions follow from these observations about our two protagonists? Firstly, we can see that minimalist moral realism is only *partly* a moral doctrine. More precisely, whilst its second, distinctly realist thesis about moral metaphysics and epistemology is indeed moral, its first thesis concerning the moral interpretation of moral objectivity, is not. Rather, since this first thesis depends (at least in part) on minimalism about semantic notions, and since minimalism is not to be supported on moral grounds but by metasemantic and logical arguments, minimalist moral realism crucially relies on non-moral considerations. Indeed, it is this theme of minimalist moral realism’s non-moral commitments which will continue to occupy us for the remainder of this paper.

Secondly, we find that whilst expressivism is compatible with moral realism—characterised by its defence of moral properties’ existence—it is just as compatible with an

error-theoretic stance that rejects their existence. Similarly, it is compatible with moral properties' mind-independence and knowability as defended by moral realists, just as it is compatible with their mind-dependence as championed by constructivists and epistemic inaccessibility as suggested by the sceptic. Accordingly, expressivists *can*, but *need not* be minimalist moral realists. Whether or not they are is an open, distinct question that depends on which *moral* positions they seek to defend, not as expressivists but as *participants* of moral practice.

In his more recent work, Kramer has already hinted that minimalist moral realists can also be expressivists: expressivism, he states, complements minimalist moral realism nicely. We have already seen one aspect of this compatibility here, in that by adopting minimalism about truth, facts, reference and representation, minimalist moral realists implicitly rely on expressivism about semantic notions. Next, I will make the stronger claim that minimalist moral realists *must* be expressivists and must be so not only about semantic notions, but also moral vocabulary. To see why, though, I first need to say a few more words about minimalist moral realism's general relationship to metasemantic enquiries into moral vocabulary.

3 Minimalist moral realism and metasemantics

So far, I have distinguished between two separate kinds of endeavours: firstly, the *non-moral*, *metasemantic* project of accounting for the meaning of expressions including semantic notions and moral terms such that internal adequacy is achieved and, secondly, the *moral* project of establishing morality's objectivity. Minimalist moral realism is clearly involved in this second project. By suggesting that minimalist moral realists must be expressivists, I seem to presume that they must also be engaged in the first endeavour. But must they?

You might think that our answer should be negative. After all, what makes minimalist moral realism *minimalist* is its opposition to metaphysical enquiries into moral discourse, holding instead that questions about morality's objectivity concern moral, and not substantively metaphysical matters. Accordingly, it might be argued that just as minimalist moral realists reject substantively *metaphysical* investigations into moral discourse, they should also reject any *metasemantic* studies about moral vocabulary. Hence, when asked how it comes that moral words acquire their respective meanings, minimalist moral realists should simply refuse to offer a response and declare instead that these are not questions that they, or anybody else for that matter, should engage in.

I find this strategy utterly unconvincing. For, whilst I am very sympathetic to the view that nothing metaphysically interesting can be said about morality's objectivity, there must be something informative that we can say about why 'good' means GOOD, rather than RIGHT, TREE or BIG, say. After all, meanings are not brute facts, nor does 'good' receive its meaning 'by magic', as Wedgwood (2007: 19) puts it. Accordingly, refusing to engage with metasemantic questions, denying their significance or adopting quietism about meaning, is not a convincing strategy for anybody to adopt. Rather, minimalist

moral realists—just like anybody else—must be able to say *something* about the meaning of moral vocabulary, where this ‘something’ must obviously be such that it does not conflict with *anything else* they would want to proclaim about moral metaphysics, moral epistemology and the objectivity of morality.⁸

Kramer appears to agree. For instance, when discussing Wedgwood’s (2007: 19) declaration that it would seem to him “incredible that it could be an absolutely unanalysable feature of a particular thought or statement that it is about one thing rather than another”, Kramer (2017: 209-210) does not push back by denying that such metasemantic magic would be incredible, but by pointing out that it would be wrong to assume that minimalist moral realism is committed to quietism about meaning. Similarly, in response to Jamie Dreier’s (2004: 35) challenge to fill in the blank in (G):

- (E) Edith said that abortion is wrong.
- (G) Its being the case that (E) consists of nothing more than _____,

Kramer (2017: 2010) declares:

Dreier chidingly refers to ‘lazy theorists [who] might just try [to fill in the blank by] more or less repeating (E).’ Filling in the blank by largely repeating E would of course be correct, but no proponent of moral realism as a moral doctrine has to rest content with that stark approach. Equally apt as a way of filling in the blank would be ‘Edith’s having ascribed to the act-type of abortion the basic moral status that is conferred or would be conferred on that act-type by any moral principle that prohibits abortion.’ This latter way of filling in the blank is more controversial than the E-repeating approach—it would need to be defended (on moral grounds) against devotees of moral particularism, for example—but a proponent of moral realism as a moral doctrine can happily adopt it.

Again, then, Kramer appears to accept Dreier’s challenge whilst rejecting the claim that minimalist moral realists have nothing informative to say about how to fill in the blank in (G). Still, whilst it should be clear that I regard Kramer as right in picking up Dreier’s gauntlet, I also believe that he provides the wrong kind of response to his challenge.

To elaborate, the most plausible reading of Wedgwood’s and Dreier’s thoughts is to interpret them as posing—you will have guessed it—a metasemantic challenge.⁹ That is, just as Wedgwood asks us to explain *what makes it the case* that a particular thought is about one thing rather than another, Dreier asks us to explain *what makes it the case* that the sentence uttered by Edith means one thing rather than another. However, Kramer’s response:

- (K) Its being the case that Edith said that abortion is wrong consists of nothing more than Edith’s having ascribed to the act-type of abortion the basic moral status that

⁸ Compare Schroeter/Schroeter’s (2019: 194) “generalized integration challenge” at this point, i.e. the “task of providing, for a given area, a simultaneously acceptable metaphysics, epistemology and metasemantics, and showing them to be so.”

⁹ For more on this interpretation, see Simpson (2018) and Dreier (2018).

is conferred or would be conferred on that act-type by any moral principle that prohibits abortion.

does not address this question. Firstly, noting that Edith ascribes the moral status of wrongness to abortion correctly describes Edith's statement, but does not tell us in virtue of what it is that the term 'wrong' means WRONG and refers to wrongness. Secondly, explaining the meaning of 'wrong' by appeal to other expressions, such as 'being prohibited by a moral principle', might engage in the project of explicating the meaning of 'wrong', but does not provide a *metasemantic* explanation of how 'wrong' obtains this meaning. To be absolutely clear, then, there is nothing wrong with (K) as such. Still, as a response to Dreier's challenge, it misses the point.

How, then, should Kramer and other minimalist moral realists respond instead? Here, two alternatives are conceivable. Firstly, they could seek to develop a *novel*, distinctly minimalist-realist metasemantics of moral vocabulary and thus provide a response which is neither expressivist nor one that a metaphysically substantive moral realist might want to give. In this case, minimalist moral realists would plant their own, new flag within the non-moral, metasemantic landscape and enter into genuine competition both with the metasemantic theory defended by expressivists and that of metaphysically substantive moral realists. Secondly, they could fall back on *established* metasemantic responses that other metaethical accounts have already developed. If so, minimalist moral realism would not add to the metasemantic debate, nor compete with the metasemantics suggested by others. Rather, minimalist moral realists would simply adopt whatever metasemantics is on offer that suits its moral defence of moral objectivity best. Which alternative is it going to be, then? I have already laid my cards on the table: I believe not only that minimalist moral realists *should* combine their account with an established metasemantic position, but that they *cannot help* but do so. And this established account will inevitably be expressivism's non-representationalism.

To see why, let us return to our distinction between the two metasemantic schools introduced above, namely representationalism and non-representationalism. Representationalists, we have said, explain the meaning of an expression on the basis of the relation that this expression bears to what it is about. For instance (and oversimplifying greatly), the term 'tree' means TREE because our use of this term is causally regulated by trees; 'bicycle' and 'clock' have different meanings because they stand for different objects in the world; in order to find out what 'good' means, we must discover to which property this term refers, etc. Non-representationalists, we have specified in turn, reject this order of explanation. That is, rather than asking what a term stands for, they submit that we need to ask which role it plays in our language and practices in order to find out about its meaning. As such, 'true' means what it does not because it refers to the property of truth, but because of its logical functions in language; 'good' obtains its meaning not because of its representation of goodness, but because it allows us to express certain motivational states, say; 'tree' means TREE not because it stands in a metaphysically robust reference relation to trees, but because of what the use of 'tree' commits and entitles us to infer within the game of giving and asking for reasons, say, where this includes, but

is not exhausted by considerations about our causal reactions to trees. Crucially, as these examples show, non-representationalism does *not* imply that all vocabularies fulfil the *same* function—far from it. Still, whichever role they play, it is this role which explains their meaning.

These two schools of representationalism and non-representationalism are generally taken to exhaust the metasemantic spectrum. Accordingly, minimalist moral realists must join one of them. Due to their own metaphysically lightweight commitments about moral properties, this cannot be metasemantic representationalism.

To see why, note that by explaining meaning in terms of notions such as truth, reference and representation, representationalism requires that these semantic notions shoulder explanatory weight within our account of meaning. Minimalist conceptions of these notions, though, cannot perform such an explanatory role. Since the minimalist truth-schema “*S* is true iff *p*” presupposes that we know what ‘*S*’ means, this schema cannot be used to explain ‘*S*’s meaning. Similarly, if properties are the shadows of predicates, we first need an understanding of the latter before we can make any judgements about the former. And if reference is not understood as a robust relation between words and the world, but is abstracted from meaning assignments so as to make sentences come out as true, reference assignments cannot *precede* meaning assignments, but must follow them.

In a nutshell, then, by requiring semantic notions to feature in explanations of meaning, representationalism presupposes substantive conceptions of truth, reference and properties. Yet, we said earlier that minimalist moral realists reject any such substantive interpretations by being minimalists about truth, reference and properties. Accordingly, minimalist moral realists cannot be representationalists about moral vocabulary. Instead, they must join expressivists in being metasemantic non-representationalists.

Still, you might think that this does not quite settle the matter of minimalist moral realists’ metasemantic position. After all, as I have indicated above, non-representationalists never tire of stressing that different vocabularies fulfil different functions, in that the notion ‘tree’, for instance, plays a very different role within our language and practices than the term ‘true’, say. Moreover, I have hinted that when spelling out the conceptual role of ‘tree’, we must take into account our disposition to react to trees, whereas we need not include any disposition to react to the property of truth when specifying the logical function of ‘true’. Accordingly, could we not declare, *within* non-representationalism, that those vocabularies which work like ‘tree’ fulfil a specifically *representational* function, whereas those which function more like ‘true’ fulfil a *non-representational* role? And could we not use this distinction to drive a wedge between minimalist moral realism and expressivism, in that minimalist moral realists could assimilate the function of moral terms such as ‘good’ to that of ‘tree’, whereas expressivists would declare that ‘good’ functions more like ‘true’, all *within* general metasemantic non-representationalism?

The answer to the first question is ‘Yes’. That to the second, though, is ‘No’. More precisely, we can indeed introduce within the general approach of non-representationalism the distinction between representational and non-representational vocabularies as suggested here. However, minimalist moral realists cannot attribute a representational

function to moral vocabulary. Again, it is their commitment to minimalism which explains why. For, note that on a minimalist reading, all assertions are representational—mathematical assertions truly or falsely represent what mathematical reality is like, just as empirical and moral assertions truly or falsely represent what the natural and moral worlds are like respectively. Accordingly, *minimalist* representation cannot sort assertoric sentences into those which fulfil a representational function and those that function non-representationally. Rather, if having a representational function is to help us in distinguishing between vocabularies that perform this function and those that do not, ‘representation’ must be given a more substantive reading than minimalism about representation allows.¹⁰ What exactly this substantive sense of representation involves need not concern us here.¹¹ Rather, it is sufficient to point out that by presupposing *some* substantive conception of representation, ascribing a representational function to moral vocabulary is incompatible with minimalist moral realism, which rejects any such substantive interpretation of moral representation. Accordingly, even if we introduce within non-representationalism the distinction between representational and non-representational vocabularies—as I believe we should—minimalist moral realists must join expressivists in ascribing a non-representational function to moral vocabulary.

Accordingly, we have now reached the point where we can see that expressivism not only *complements* minimalist moral realism, but also that minimalist moral realists *must* be expressivists, not only about semantic notions but also moral vocabulary: Whilst they cannot withdraw to quietism about meaning due to quietism’s general implausibility, they cannot adopt metasemantic representationalism or ascribe a representational function to moral vocabulary due to their own minimalist commitments about moral discourse. Accordingly, minimalist moral realists have no choice but to join the expressivist camp of non-representationalism.

4 What minimalist moral realism is and what it is not

What follows for minimalist moral realism, then?

Firstly, even if we have now established that minimalist moral realists must be expressivists, this does not settle which kind of expressivism they should accept. Its best-known version is certainly ideationalist expressivism, according to which the meaning of utterances is explained by appeal to the mental states they express, whilst moral

¹⁰ 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].”

¹¹ 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), deliberative indispensability (Enoch 2011), specific explanations of success (Boyd 1989), language entry transitions (Tiefensee 2016), or some other substantive account of description and representation.

utterances are taken to express motivational mental states (Blackburn 1998, Gibbard 2003, Ridge 2014). As I have hinted earlier, though, I believe that minimalist moral realists are better advised to adopt inferentialist expressivism instead (Brandom 1994, Chrisman 2016).¹² Why? Remember that minimalist moral realists need to supplement their account with a metasemantics which best suits their take on moral objectivity. Remember also that this metasemantics needs to achieve internal adequacy, such that it can adequately account for all features that are internal to moral practice, including minimalist moral realists' claims about morality's objectivity. Without arguing this point here, I believe that inferentialist expressivism has the edge over ideationalist expressivism in this respect: As it does not focus on any motivational mental states that moral utterances allegedly express, but on the metaconceptual role played by moral vocabulary, inferentialist expressivism promises to offer a more direct route to internal adequacy and propositions about morality's objectivity than ideationalist expressivism.¹³

Of course, adopting inferentialist expressivism does not imply that minimalist moral realists need to accept everything inferentialist expressivists say about moral vocabulary, nor that they would be barred from making new suggestions as to how this inferentialist take on moral vocabulary could be expanded and improved.¹⁴ And of course, whenever they do so, they will need to make sure that their suggestions achieve the best possible fit with their specific take on the objectivity of morality. Still, when developing these suggestions, they will not do so *qua* moral realists, and thus as defenders of moral objectivity, but as non-moral metasemanticists whose aim it is to provide the best non-moral account of moral language. Indeed, they *cannot* do so *qua* moral realists: *Minimalist* moral properties, *minimalist* moral facts and *minimalist* moral representation, I have argued above, cannot play any explanatory role within our account of meaning. Accordingly, if minimalist moral realists' take on moral objectivity were indeed correct, moral truths, facts and properties could no longer offer any metasemantic linchpins; rather they would simply drop out of our metasemantic story altogether.

This, in turn, has two important implications. Firstly, observing that the minimalist take on moral objectivity necessitates a non-representationalist metasemantics entails that the success of minimalist moral realism depends on the success of expressivism. More precisely, if expressivism *failed* to achieve internal adequacy—that is, if it could *not* successfully account for those propositions about moral objectivity that minimalist moral realists seek to defend within moral discourse—minimalist moral realists could no longer defend both the objectivity of morality and its minimalist interpretation, but would have

¹² This is not to say that these versions exhaust the expressivist spectrum. Rather, there are arguably also conceptual role accounts of expressivism which are not inferentialist (Köhler Ms.).

¹³ For instance, inferentialist expressivism might be better placed to eschew Frege-Geach-like problems, questions about the cognitivist categorisation of moral discourse and potentially tricky follow-up questions about the content of the mental states expressed by moral utterances which is supposed to explain their meaning. For more on this, see Tiefensee (Ms.). Needless to say, this is not to imply that inferentialist expressivism comes without problems itself.

¹⁴ For instance, I (Ms.) try to do so when presenting a new inferentialist account of evaluative moral notions that seeks to supplement inferentialists' dominant focus on deontic operators such as 'ought' with a theory about notions such as 'good'.

to choose between them: Either, they could continue to defend morality's objectivity, but would now have to adopt representationalism and thus a substantive approach to moral facts and properties that can successfully account for propositions about morality's objectivity. Or they could cling on to expressivism and minimalist interpretations of these about moral truths and properties, but would now have to declare that these are not objective. Either way, then, if you believe that expressivism does indeed fail to be internally adequate, you cannot be a minimalist moral realist.

Secondly, these considerations show that you cannot be both a minimalist moral realist and hold moral realism to stand in conflict with expressivism. Rather, you once more face a clear choice: Either, you continue to hold that the minimalist take on moral objectivity is correct, but must accept that moral realism does not compete with expressivism. Or you have the strong intuition that moral realism and expressivism do indeed stand in conflict with one another, but must now accept a representationalist account of moral vocabulary which presupposes substantive understandings of moral facts and properties.¹⁵ Accordingly, if you do indeed want moral realism to present an alternative to metasemantic expressivism, and if you do want moral facts and properties to play a role within metasemantics, you cannot be a minimalist moral realist. *Qua* realists, minimalist moral realists simply have nothing to contribute to this metasemantic debate.

But if so, can they offer anything new to any *other* debate? Yes. For, although they cannot, *qua* moral realists, contribute to metasemantics and although I do not believe that they seek to contribute to first-order ethical debate as pursued by utilitarians and Kantians, say, minimalist moral realist *can* present novel and interesting arguments exactly about those *abstract* questions regarding moral objectivity which, as Kramer (2009: 11) repeatedly stresses, are still part of *moral* discourse. That is, minimalist moral realists should not be required to present novel metasemantic accounts of meaning. Nor do they develop answers to concrete moral questions, such as 'Is it morally permissible to break someone's confidence?', 'Are all equal resource distributions just?', or 'Did David act morally recklessly?'. Instead, they present new responses to abstract moral questions such as 'Are there determinately correct answers to moral problems?', 'Are moral truths mind-independent and if so, in which way?', or 'Can our moral beliefs be false when we are in a state of ideal rational reflection?'. Importantly, given their degree of abstraction, answering these questions requires different arguments from providing responses to concrete moral queries. For instance, when asked about moral determinacy, we cannot simply respond that it is true that breaking Emma's confidence is permissible because it would prevent great harm. Instead, we have to explain *on moral grounds* why it is true that 'Either, breaking Emma's confidence is permissible or it is not permissible' holds.¹⁶ Importantly, providing such moral answers to abstract moral questions is far from straightforward.

¹⁵ Whilst certain metaphysically substantive moral realists clearly opt for metasemantic representationalism (Brink 1989, Boyd 1988), the assessment of other substantive realist accounts, such as Wedgwood's (2007) conceptual role account, is a little trickier. The way I understand him, though, Wedgwood combines this conceptual role account with a substantive account of truth. I ignore these complexities here.

¹⁶ For more on this, see Tiefensee (forthcoming).

Accordingly, it is with regard to such abstract, moral arguments about moral objectivity, that I believe minimalist moral realism shines.

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