

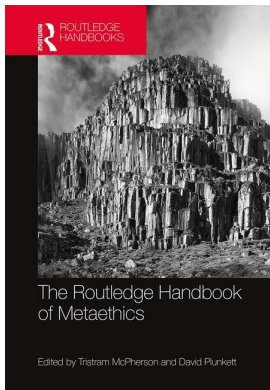
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### **The Autonomy of Ethics**

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## The Autonomy of Ethics

Barry Maguire

### INTRODUCTION

David Hume introduced the autonomy of ethics as follows:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.

An autonomy thesis maintains that facts or propositions in some domain are isolated in some respect from those in some other domain, or perhaps all other domains. Some of the most interesting philosophical conjectures have been autonomy theses of one kind or another. Think of Gottlob Frege's anti-psychologism about mathematics, Donald Davidson's anomalous monism in philosophy of mind, Jerry Fodor's 'disunity of science' hypothesis or Bertrand Russell's claim that "You can never arrive at a general proposition by inference from particular propositions alone. You will always have to have at least one general proposition in your premises" (Russell 1918/19: 199). Even within the normative domain, a variety of different autonomy theses is discussed: the autonomy of morality from prudence, reasons from rationality, theoretical reason from practical reason.

In this chapter, I will stick to the general question of the autonomy of the ethical domain from the non-ethical domain. I assume that the ethical domain contains facts about good and bad states of affairs, including facts about what is good or bad for individuals. It also contains facts about how one should live, act, and feel. I use ‘ethical’ expansively to include prudential as well as moral considerations. I’ll occasionally use substantive examples, but the arguments do not depend on any of these specific examples. Non-ethical facts (propositions, etc.) include scientific facts; other contingent facts, for instance concerning the goings-on of cats and mats; ‘supernatural facts’ about God’s will; and psychological facts about beliefs and desires. I’ll use the word ‘descriptive’ stipulatively to pick out the intuitively non-ethical. It is important that ‘ethical’ and ‘descriptive’ are not logical contraries. Conjunctions of ethical and descriptive propositions might turn out to be *both* ethical and descriptive.

Here is a smattering of examples of the sorts of ethical transitions that philosophers have worried about:

1. The invasion of Iraq contravened international law, therefore the invasion of Iraq was wrong (Campbell Brown 2012).
2. Individuals are motivated by personal gain, therefore the principles of justice allow inequalities so long as these improve the positions of the worst off (Cohen 2008 on Rawls).
3. Jones uttered the words “I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars,” therefore Jones has an obligation to pay Smith five dollars (Searle 1964).
4. Ronnie wants to dance, therefore Ronnie has a reason to dance (Schroeder 2007).

I will discuss three types of ethical autonomy thesis, distinguished by the types of relation maintained *not* to obtain between the antecedents and consequents in arguments such as these: logical relations, metaphysical relations, and epistemic relations. (I’ll talk variously in terms of facts, propositions, or sentences, as befits different types of autonomy relations.) I’ll express some doubts about the serviceability of logical accounts and, in the end, some doubts about the significance of a purely metaphysical account. I’ll suggest that the real motivation for metaphysical and logical autonomy arises from the importance of an epistemological thesis, namely the thesis that non-ethical propositions are irrelevant to the justification of non-derivative ethical propositions.

### LOGICAL AUTONOMY

Let’s start with the most familiar, and perhaps most tempting, type of proposal, one that leans (too) heavily on Hume’s claim that one cannot “deduce” an ethical sentence from a descriptive sentence. Let E be some paradigmatic ethical sentence, for instance ‘it is impermissible to starve the Irish’ and let D be some paradigmatic descriptive sentence, for instance ‘Echidnas are egg-laying mammals’. According to *logical* characterizations, the autonomy of ethics consists in the fact that certain logical relations do not obtain between sentences such as D and sentences such as E. Let’s start with:

SIMPLE LOGICAL AUTONOMY: no descriptive sentence entails an ethical sentence.

There is an immediate problem with this thesis.  $(D \ \& \ \sim D)$  entails  $E$ , our ethical sentence.  $D$  entails  $((E \ \& \ (D \ \vee \ \sim D)))$ , and  $D$  also entails  $(E \ \vee \ \sim E)$ . Assuming some modest taxonomic principles, it follows that SIMPLE LOGICAL AUTONOMY is false. Now, perhaps it is not too ad hoc to respond to this problem by restricting the autonomy thesis to exclude arguments involving impossible antecedents and necessary consequents. A more interesting counterexample to simple logical autonomy is due to Arthur Prior (1960). He argued as follows:

1.  $D$  entails  $(D \ \vee \ E)$
2.  $((D \ \vee \ E) \ \& \ \sim D)$  entails  $E$
3. Either  $(D \ \vee \ E)$  is ethical or not.
4. If so, then 1 constitutes a counterexample to simple logical autonomy.
5. If not, then 2 constitutes a counterexample to simple logical autonomy.
6. Therefore simple logical autonomy is false.

Premises 1 and 2 are incontestable. We'll find occasion to doubt premise 3 later, but not on grounds shared by the simple logical autonomist, so let's grant it for now. If  $(D \ \vee \ E)$  is ethical, premise 4 follows directly from 1. If  $(D \ \vee \ E)$  is not ethical, then (so long as we assume that a conjunction with non-ethical conjuncts is non-ethical) premise 5 also follows. Hence it seems we should reject SIMPLE LOGICAL AUTONOMY.

One natural move in reply is to restrict the logical autonomy thesis to exclude 'vacuous' entailments. In an important series of papers, Charles Pigden defends this approach (1989, 2010). He defines a notion of vacuous entailment as follows. An expression  $x$  occurs vacuously in the conclusion of a valid inference if and only if under any interpretation of the premises and conclusion such that they both come out true, we can uniformly substitute for  $x$  any other expression of the same grammatical type without upsetting the validity. Pigden then offers the following revised thesis:

NON-VACUOUS LOGICAL AUTONOMY: no descriptive sentence non-vacuously entails an ethical sentence.

Since  $x$  might be a sentence rather than just a predicate, this definition accounts for the vacuity of arguments with necessarily false antecedents or necessarily true consequents. Here's how this principle avoids Prior's objection. Premise 1 is a vacuous entailment, since  $D$  entails the disjunction of  $D$  and anything you like. Premise 2 is also a vacuous entailment, since for any proposition  $P$ ,  $((D \ \vee \ P) \ \& \ \sim D)$  entails  $P$ . Hence both fall outside the scope of NON-VACUOUS LOGICAL AUTONOMY.

The central problem with NON-VACUOUS LOGICAL AUTONOMY is that it overgeneralises. On Pigden's account, the autonomy of ethics is just an instance of the conservativity of logic. The conservativity of logic applies as much to the non-vacuous entailment of sentences about elephants as obligations.

Hence, NON-VACUOUS LOGICAL AUTONOMY is unlikely to be the distinction Hume famously drew our attention to. For instance, minimally, we want an autonomy thesis to distinguish between:

1. Ronnie has a desire to dance, therefore Ronnie has a reason to dance.
2. Ronnie has an obligation to dance, therefore Ronnie ought to dance.

Both are equally autonomous in Pigden's sense. There are no non-vacuous logical entailments from premises about desires or obligations to conclusions about reasons or ought. However, intuitively, 1 but not 2 violates the autonomy of ethics. So there is more to the autonomy of ethics than non-vacuous logical autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

The autonomy of ethics has been thought by many to be an exciting, controversial thesis with a wide variety of implications for ethics, for metaethics, and for general metaphysics and epistemology. T. M. Scanlon (2014) argues that a proper characterization of non-naturalism depends upon a proper understanding of autonomy. G. A. Cohen (2008) argues that the debate between liberals and socialists turns on an issue closely related to autonomy. James Dreier (2004) argues that the defence of Blackburn's quasi-realism depends on an autonomy thesis and an associated account of the metaethics/ethics distinction. Ronald Dworkin (1996, 2011) argues, from a premise about the autonomy of the ethical domain, that ethical nihilism is not merely false but incoherent. Then there are all the other great autonomy theses in other parts of philosophy. Many esteemed philosophers have taken there to be something philosophically substantive at stake. In the pursuit of an adequate characterization of an *exciting* thesis, we will need to appeal beyond Pigden's sparse logical resources.

### METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY

By 'metaphysical' accounts of autonomy, I have in mind those that make some claim about the modal status, or grounding relationships, or natures, of ethical facts or principles. Metaphysical autonomy theses deny, of at least some ethical facts, that they are identical to, or fully explained by, or modally sensitive to, or underwritten by descriptive facts or properties.

Let's start with identity. Insisting that at least one ethical fact is not identical to any descriptive fact would appear to be a necessary condition for any metaphysical characterization of ethical autonomy:

**NON-IDENTITY:** At least one ethical fact is not identical to any descriptive fact.

Versions of NON-IDENTITY restricted to value or morality are inconsistent with familiar brands of ethical naturalism: straightforward reductive realism (e.g. David Lewis's dispositional theory of value [1989]), analytical naturalism (e.g. in Frank Jackson [1998]) and synthetic naturalism (e.g. in Richard Boyd [1988]).

This familiar thesis – NON-IDENTITY – may not draw quite the distinction we are after. For instance, various subjectivists hope to preserve the explanatory priority of clearly non-ethical descriptive facts over all ethical facts, while also denying the 'autonomy of ethics' in some important sense. Mark Schroeder (2007) maintains that, for any A, some fact F is a reason for A to *x* if and only if and *in virtue of* the fact that F explains the fact that *x*-ing would increase the probability of the satisfaction of at least one of A's desires. The 'in virtue of relation' here is asymmetric, so this is not a straightforward identity thesis. (It may be a non-straightforward identity thesis, if one additionally defends the hypothesis that any fact fully grounded by a descriptive fact is a descriptive fact, and one identified ethical facts with these grounded descriptive facts.)

In order to characterize asymmetric descriptivist views as non-autonomous, we need a stronger, and perhaps more interesting, autonomy thesis. Some motivation for this alternative characterization is provided by G. A. Cohen (2008):

Suppose someone affirms the principle that *we should keep our promises* (call that P) because *only when promises are kept can promises successfully pursue their projects* (call that F). Then she will surely agree that she believes that F supports P because she affirms ... that we should help people to pursue their projects.

The general version of the thought is this: if some ethical E1 seems to be explained by some non-ethical facts N1, that's only in cooperation with some underlying ethical principle E2. If E2, in turn, seems to be explained by some non-ethical N2, that's only in virtue of some deeper ethical principle E3, and so on. To borrow a metaphor from Gideon Rosen (2010), this view insists that any tree with ethical branches will have at least one ethical root. We can capture this in the following thesis (adapted from Maguire [2015]; for refinements see Jack Woods [ms]):

**METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY:** If an ethical fact has grounds, these include at least one ethical fact. (Equivalently: No ethical fact is fully grounded just by descriptive facts.)

One can use **METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY** as a fulcrum to argue that many enthymematic premises are ethical principles. For instance, suppose we assume that the grounds of the fact that Ronnie has a reason to dance are precisely two – some fact about his desire, and Schroeder's subjectivist thesis itself. Suppose we also assume that the fact about his desire is a non-ethical fact. Then **METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY** entails that the subjectivist thesis itself is an ethical thesis. Or take Searle's example. The fact about your obligation to keep your promise is moral. That fact obtains in virtue of the preceding premises – including that Jones uttered the words "I hereby promise to pay you, Smith, five dollars" – together with some covering principles (these are spelled out by Searle). According to **METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY**, at least one of these premises or principles is ethical. Or take Campbell Brown's example. The invasion of Iraq contravened international law, therefore the invasion of Iraq was wrong. If **METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY** is true, some ethical principle must also be true in this case. We can look around to see whether any plausible principles underlie this transition, for instance, some principle of the form 'It is wrong to violate international law'. This, in turn, might be true for a variety of reasons: because contraventions of international law by superpowers lead to countless other wrongful infractions, or involve disrespect to international neighbours, or perhaps because it is in the nature of international law to be just.

A metaphysical principle like **METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY** will avoid the troubles facing logical autonomy theses. It clearly avoids the argument from explosion, since  $(D \ \& \ \sim D)$  does not plausibly ground any ethical fact E, nor does any descriptive D ground  $(E \vee \sim E)$ . Grounding is an explanatory relation, and there is no explanation here.

What about Prior's argument? If we swap the entailments for grounds, the premises are:

1. D grounds  $(D \vee E)$
2.  $((D \vee E) \ \& \ \sim D)$  grounds E

3. Either  $(D \vee E)$  is ethical or not.

It is not plausible that 2 is true. No disjunction grounds its disjuncts; the grounding relation goes the other way around. What about 1? There are two options. If  $E$  is false, then 1 doesn't plausibly provide a counterexample to METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY since we have no reason to think the disjunction is ethical. It has an ethical constituent, but only in a metaphysically impotent disjunct. If  $E$  is true, then since disjunctions are grounded by their disjuncts, we still don't have a counterexample.  $D$  grounds  $(D \vee E)$ , but so does  $E$ . This is a case of metaphysical overdetermination, just as when the fact that there is a large dog in the office is fully grounded both by the fact that the bloodhound is in the office, and the fact that the mastiff is in the office.

So, a principle like METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY has several virtues. Let's now consider some related challenges, based on the thought that there are various distinct explanatory roles that putative ethical facts might play. Consider the following explanatory chain:

1. The right thing to do is to spare his life.
2. Sparing his life would maximize expected utility.
3. UTILITARIANISM: An act is right if and only if, and if so in virtue of the fact that, it maximizes expected utility.
4. METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM: To be the right thing to do is to be the thing that would maximize expected utility.

Assuming utilitarianism, it is natural to think that 1 is fully grounded just in 2 and 3. Assume that 2 is a descriptive fact. Hence, by METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY, 3 is an ethical fact. It is natural, in turn, to think that the biconditional thesis in 3 is fully grounded just in the definitional thesis in 4. The problem arises when we consider the familiar proposal that, as a metaethical thesis about essences, 4 is not itself ethical. If so, we have a counterexample to METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY. This is the first challenge: that UTILITARIANISM, an ethical fact, is fully grounded just by METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM, a non-ethical fact.

In fact, METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY appears to be in even more trouble. For once METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM is on the scene, it is less clear that 1 is grounded by 2 and 3. An alternative proposal has it that 1 is fully grounded just by 2. *This* fact, the fact that 2 fully grounds 1, is itself metaphysically explained by METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM. On this account, we have at least one instance of a descriptive fact grounding an ethical fact, viz. the fact about the right thing to do being grounded by the fact about utility maximization. This is the second challenge: that the rightness fact in 1 is fully grounded just by the fact about expected utility in 2.

There may also be a third challenge here. Take the (putative) fact that [2 grounds 1]. If facts about the explanations of ethical facts are ethical, then the fact that [2 grounds 1] is itself an ethical fact. If we further assume that the 'underwriting' relation is the grounding relation and we continue to assume that the definitional thesis in 4 is descriptive, then the fact that 4 grounds the fact that [2 grounds 1] is another counterexample to METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY. To repeat: this third challenge arises if one is committed to the fact that [2 grounds 1] is ethical and fully grounded just by the combination of 2, which is non-ethical, and METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM, which is (thought to be) non-ethical.

There is some wiggle room here and there. One option in defence of METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY is to concede that *if* there were enough true descriptive definitions of ethical properties to do the work of explaining every ethical fact, then METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY would not be true. However, the defender would roll up her sleeves and deny, on first-order grounds, that there are enough such true definitions. The principle in 4, for instance, is false if UTILITARIANISM is false.

An alternative option preserves the spirit but not the letter of METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY. One might allow that some descriptive facts fully ground ethical facts, for instance, that 2 fully grounds 1. However, one can insist that whenever some descriptive fact fully grounds some ethical fact, the fact that that descriptive fact grounds that ethical fact is itself underwritten by an ethical fact. This may be because some ethical principle is playing an explanatory role without being a *ground* (on which, see Bader [ms]). Or it may be by virtue of a definitional fact like METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM itself. The ethicality of such a non-grounding ethical principle or of METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM would need to be defended, not on the basis that ethicality is preserved across grounds, as such, but on the basis that the full metaphysical explanation of any ethical fact will include at least one ethical fact. This gives some leeway to allow that metaphysical explanations may have more structure than simple chains of grounds – either because grounding facts themselves have grounds, or because grounding facts are underwritten in some other way.

The metaphysical autonomist may want to avoid getting stuck in these metaphysical debates about different types of explanation or different types of reduction. There had seemed to be something in particular at stake, and it doesn't seem likely that this important thing will be fully captured by the fruits of *these* inquiries. It doesn't seem particularly plausible that the question of the autonomy of ethics is reducible to the question of whether there is only one metaphysical explanatory relation. Again, something important seems to have been left out of the analysis. I think this is evidence that the most significant thesis in the ballpark is not a metaphysical thesis. It is a thesis that has metaphysical implications, which can make these metaphysical disputes rather urgent. But the heart of the autonomy of ethics is not metaphysical. It is epistemological.

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL AUTONOMY

Let's start with an analogy. Ethical facts are irrelevant to the justification of scientific theories (for discussion, see Barber [2013]). The ethical significance of some scientific result might well be relevant to the decision to *publish* the result. This would be a practical matter. But it would be irrelevant to its epistemic justification. No matter how much morally better it would be if scientific theory S1 were true than S2, just a smidgen more scientific evidence for S2 would make you epistemically unjustified in believing S1 rather than S2. Similarly, no matter how much evidence you have about the way people actually think, this would not amount to a refutation of the validity of some argument in some formal system. The domain of science sets the standards for what counts as scientific evidence; moral value is scientifically irrelevant. Different formal systems set the standards for different kinds of entailment; facts about the inference patterns of experimental subjects are irrelevant.



Just so, the thought goes, the domain of ethics (or morality, or normativity, as the case may be) sets the standards for what counts as evidence for pure ethical propositions (i.e. ethical propositions that, if true, do not partly obtain in virtue of descriptive facts). Non-ethical philosophical considerations are ruled to be justificatorily irrelevant.

The restriction to 'pure' ethical propositions is important. There are normative facts about what you should do in particular situations, and clearly some non-ethical propositions – that there is a lion in the living room – will be relevant to their justification. Epistemic autonomy applies only to ethical propositions that are not contingent on such descriptive propositions. So let's stick with non-mixed ethical principles like UTILITARIANISM for now, and consider, for argument's sake, the following strong principle:

**SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY:** no non-ethical evidence is relevant to the epistemic justification of any pure ethical proposition.

The notion of relevance here is wide-ranging. According to this thesis, no non-ethical evidence can attenuate or defeat your justification for some non-mixed ethical proposition, no non-ethical evidence can intensify your justification for some non-mixed ethical proposition and no non-ethical evidence can constitute evidence on its own for some non-mixed ethical proposition. So for instance, if we assume that Schroeder's subjectivism is a metaethical thesis, and that metaethical theses are non-ethical, SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY entails that evidence for subjectivism is irrelevant to the epistemic justification of any pure ethical proposition. There might still be evidence for subjectivism as a substantive ethical thesis, e.g. that desires often seem to give reasons in tie-breaking cases. SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY dovetails nicely with METAPHYSICAL AUTONOMY.

This thesis is silent about whether, conversely, (pure or mixed) ethical propositions are ever justificatorily relevant to your descriptive propositions. Presumably, ethical propositions might be relevant to your epistemic justification for *some* descriptive propositions. For instance, if there are any purely metaethical (and hence presumably descriptive) propositions – for instance, the thesis that ethical nihilism is false – one's epistemic justification for these propositions will be considerably affected by one's epistemic justification for certain ethical propositions.

Hence SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY espouses a justificatory asymmetry between ethical and descriptive propositions. Pure ethical propositions may be justificatorily relevant to descriptive propositions (SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY is silent about this), but descriptive propositions are not justificatorily relevant to non-mixed ethical propositions. On this way of thinking, metaethics is epistemically subordinated to ethics. This is not, of course, to deny that metaethics is an important enterprise.

The most natural objections to this thesis will come from 'debunking' hypotheses about the origin of our ethical beliefs or intuitions, and from issues concerning disagreement and moral expertise. These issues require careful consideration. I refer the reader to Sharon Street (2006) and Katia Vavova (2014), and the pertinent chapters in this volume. Something will also need to be said about perfectly general defeaters like drinking too much whisky before thinking about what to do.

Instead, we'll move on to consider a variation on the challenge from the previous section. Since METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM entails UTILITARIANISM, and since it is plausible that evidence for P is evidence for (a non-tautologous) Q if P entails Q, it is plausible that evidence for METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM is evidence for UTILITARIANISM itself. This would contradict SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY.

I suggest that theses like METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM are best understood as complex, obtaining in virtue of an ethical thesis and an otherwise ethically neutral metaphysical thesis (which may well be non-ethical). The evidence in favour of the otherwise neutral metaphysical thesis does not provide evidence in favour of any specific ethical thesis.

Let me spell this out a bit. The idea is that METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM is a hybrid of UTILITARIANISM – the thesis that, necessarily, an action is right if and only if it is utility maximizing – and some metaphysical thesis, perhaps IDENTITY, the thesis that necessarily coextensive properties are identical, or perhaps some asymmetric explanatory relationship such as in Schroeder (2007) and Rosen (2010). IDENTITY is neutral about what is right and wrong. It is neutral between UTILITARIANISM and competing ethical theories. Similarly, UTILITARIANISM is neutral concerning whether rightness is identical with whatever property is the ‘rightness-maker’, or whether rightness is a distinct non-descriptive property instantiated by all and only the rightness-makers. We break down the evidence for METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM into distinct sets of evidence for these two distinct theses. Some evidence will be purely philosophical or metaethical, addressing ethically neutral hypotheses concerning the relationship between ethical and descriptive properties. Other evidence will be purely ethical, addressing otherwise descriptively neutral hypotheses concerning which properties are rightness-makers (or reason-givers or value-bearers or whatever). METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM itself is, as it were, doubly vulnerable, since it is required to withstand both ethical scrutiny and general metaphysical scrutiny.

But suppose that the ethical theory that stood up to our most rigorous first-order ethical inquiry was *also* somehow supported by some argument from purely descriptive premises. Suppose that some specific first-order theory was vindicated by our best-going metaphysics and epistemology of ethics, and perhaps also fitted nicely with a plausible philosophy of language and an empirically respectable moral psychology. Wouldn't that constitute *some* further justification for the relevant ethical theory? Perhaps not. Such further justification would be inconsistent with SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY. We need to lean again on the analogy with science or mathematics. Ethical beliefs are utterly irrelevant to the justification of scientific theories, whether they would impose major revisions or minor marginal revisions. Just the same is true of scientific theories and ethical justification. (The same is true of logic – recall Frege's logic/psychology autonomy thesis.) No matter how considerable the evidence in favour of the metaethical thesis, that doesn't lend any weight to the *ethical* principle.

We are now in a position to interpret an infamous passage from Ronald Dworkin (1996, 100–101):

There is no difference in what two people think if one thinks that the only thing that can make an act right is its maximizing power, so that it makes no sense to evaluate rightness in any other way, and the other thinks that the property of rightness and the property of maximizing power are the very same property. The second opinion uses the jargon of metaphysics, but it cannot add any genuine idea to the first, or subtract any from it. It sounds more philosophical but it is no less evaluative.

Dworkin is right in that these two remarks are ethically equivalent, but wrong in that they are metaphysically equivalent. They are ethically equivalent not just because they

agree modally (as we assume) in their evaluations but because they agree in their evaluative explanations. Both maintain that it is the maximization of utility that makes some particular action right. But Dworkin is wrong to deny that there is a separate set of questions, in general metaphysics, about the relations that may or may not obtain between modally coextensive properties. Certain questions about reduction and identity and explanation – and if naturalism turns on the availability of ontological reductions or identity theses, questions about naturalism – are strictly orthogonal to questions about extensionality or normative explanation. There *is* a domain of purely metaethical questions about ethics: questions about the metaphysical status of ethical principles, the answers to which are neutral concerning questions about *which* ethical principles are true.

Let's now turn to another challenge. Let ANALYTICAL UTILITARIANISM be the thesis that the word 'right' just means 'conducive to general happiness'. Tristram McPherson (2008) writes:

... it is easy to find counterexamples to [SIMPLE EPISTEMIC AUTONOMY], in the form of metaethical theories with direct normative implications. ... analytical utilitarianism is an account of the semantics of a central piece of moral vocabulary, and hence a paradigmatic metaethical theory. However, it also transparently has implications for the content of the correct normative theory.

The response here must be a little different, since it is less plausible that ANALYTICAL UTILITARIANISM is a hybrid thesis.

Suppose we found ourselves with decisive sociological evidence for the hypothesis that, in the mouths of speakers in the United States in the early part of the twenty-first century, the word 'right' means 'utility maximizing'. It would remain an open question whether UTILITARIANISM is true, for it remains open whether these speakers should change what they mean by this word, or perhaps stop using it altogether. This is a familiar point. Perhaps we meant something different by 'solid' before we found that tables were mostly space, or by 'simultaneously' before we learned about general relativity. What is important is what is right, not what people happen to mean by the word 'right'.

But there is a puzzle here. When we say "what is important is what is right, not what we mean by 'right'" what do we mean by 'right' the first time it appears in that sentence? If we mean the same thing by 'right' both times, then surely finding out what we mean by 'right' *will* be a way to find out what is right?

One line of reply to this puzzle is to appeal to the notion of a 'reforming definition' (Rawls 1971; Brandt 1979) or 'critical analysis' (e.g. in Haslanger [2012, 223–225]; compare Burgess and Plunkett [2013]). Sally Haslanger says this (2000: 31–55):

[On] an *analytical* approach to the question, "What is gender?" or "What is race?" ... the task is not to explicate our ordinary concepts; nor is it to investigate the kind that we may or may not be tracking with our everyday conceptual apparatus; instead we begin by considering more fully the pragmatics of our talk employing the terms in question. What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes;

if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better? In the limit case of an analytical approach the concept in question is introduced by stipulating the meaning of a new term, and its content is determined entirely by the role it plays in the theory. ...

Suppose it turned out that we use 'right' to mean 'utility maximizing', or 'good' to mean 'good for me', or 'reason' to mean 'something that would satisfy a desire I would have under modestly idealized conditions'. We can ask whether these are the most effective conceptual tools we can use to think about the moral, the evaluative, or the normative. There are other concepts available. We might instead use 'good' to mean 'good *simpliciter*', 'reason' to mean 'promotion of states it would be good to care about' and 'right' to mean 'what I have most reason to do'. Which of these concepts is best? Which should we adopt? The obvious difficulty with answering this question is that we'll encounter the same challenge concerning these standards of 'best' and 'should', as they pertain to theory choice. What if by 'which concept is best?' you mean 'which concept favors impartial good promotion' or 'which concept defers to God's will'?

This is an important challenge. Plausibly, all we can do in response is to exercise due diligence in our ethical theorizing. The important thing is that even if some purely sociological account of the extension of some ethical word were offered, this would not *itself* settle any ethical question without admitting an *ethical* defence. The hard line here – and I continue to find it plausible – is that the sociological evidence would be justificatorily *irrelevant* to the relevant ethical thesis itself.

## CONCLUSION

I distinguished accounts of the autonomy of ethics into logical, metaphysical, and epistemological proposals.

The simplest logical proposals succumb to Prior's well-known challenge. More sophisticated proposals such as Pigden's succeed in avoiding Prior's challenge but do not manage to draw the distinction we are after.

There are various metaphysical proposals available. The simplest denies that ethical facts are identical to intuitively non-ethical facts. A more sophisticated version denies that ethical facts are fully grounded just by intuitively non-ethical facts. This more sophisticated version may need to be refined if ethical principles are not grounds or partial grounds but play some other metaphysical role. These discussions become rather arcane, and it becomes less clear where the urgency lies in questions of ethical taxonomy.

That led us to the bold epistemological thesis, that intuitively non-ethical evidence is irrelevant to the justification of non-mixed ethical beliefs. This thesis has some hope of withstanding challenges from METAPHYSICAL UTILITARIANISM and ANALYTICAL UTILITARIANISM. The first is a hybrid of an ethical principle and a thesis in general metaphysics. The second is perhaps of sociological rather than ethical significance.

These discussions are complementary. Given the asymmetry of justification, we need to look for a metaphysics of ethics that is consistent with our best first-order theory of ethics, just like we need to look for a metaphysics of science that is consistent with our best scientific theory.

## NOTE

1. For a critical discussion of some model theoretic characterizations of autonomy, see Maguire and Woods (forthcoming).

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