

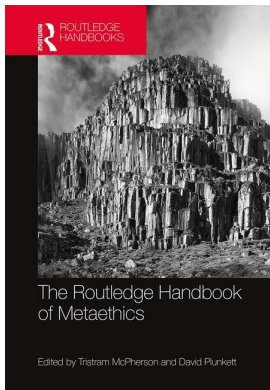
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### Metaethical Quietism

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## Metaethical Quietism

Doug Kremm and Karl Schafer

Much like fanatics and hipsters, quietists are seldom quick to describe themselves as such. So it's unsurprising that contemporary metaethicists tend to avoid describing themselves in such terms. Indeed, many of the authors discussed below would actively oppose any such label. And yet analytic metaethics has often been haunted by the specter of various forms of metaethical quietism. For it is distinctive of quietism that it calls into question, if not the very intelligibility of much of metaethics, then at least its point.

In this essay, we begin by discussing how to understand metaethical quietism. In doing so, we distinguish several attitudes towards canonical metaethical questions that might be regarded as quietist. Then we discuss some prominent motivations for quietism—before turning to some recent objections to these views. We conclude by saying a bit about the relationship between these issues and more general questions of philosophical methodology. In discussing these issues, we will attempt to be as charitable as possible to the quietist—not because we are necessarily quietists ourselves—but because we want these views to have as fair a hearing as possible.

### CHARACTERIZING QUIETISM

As we understand it, quietism in its various forms can be characterized in terms of the rejection of some range of questions as unworthy of philosophical debate. As a first pass, then, a metaethical quietist can be understood as someone who rejects at least a significant subset of metaethical questions in this way.

So understood, as a question-directed attitude (Friedman 2013), quietism can be made precise in at least two ways: First, with respect to the precise sort of “rejection” it involves, and, second, with respect to the set of questions it rejects.

On the first issue, we can distinguish the following grounds on which someone might reject a set of questions, Q:

*Unintelligible:* The questions within Q lack meaning or sense.

*Indeterminate:* The answers to the questions within Q lack determinate truth-conditions.

*Presupposition Failure:* The questions within Q involve a false presupposition.

*Irresolvable:* The questions within Q are in principle rationally irresolvable.

*Inaccessible:* The answers to the questions within Q are epistemically inaccessible.

*Irrelevant:* The questions within Q are irrelevant to the underlying concerns that are supposed to make these questions interesting or significant.

As we will see, quietists are often less than fully clear about exactly which sort of rejection they mean to endorse. But it will be useful to keep these possibilities in mind in what follows.

Similar difficulties of interpretation also arise with the second issue. Here it is important to stress two things. First, as will become clear, most forms of quietism are motivated by views that might reasonably be regarded as metaethical—such as views about the nature of normative concepts or inquiry. Thus, most “metaethical quietists” are not really quietists about *all* aspects of metaethics. Rather, they are quietists about *certain sorts* of metaethical questions, and their quietism about these questions is grounded in their views about other areas of metaethics. Most often, their quietism relates to the metaphysical aspects of contemporary metaethics, but it often extends to epistemological and semantic questions within metaethics—especially if these are understood in a manner that involves implicit metaphysical commitments. But all the same, this local quietism is usually motivated by further commitments about the nature of normative talk and thought. As such—while there is tendency for localized quietism to “creep” out to other areas—truly universal metaethical quietism is a creature seldom seen in the wild.

In addition, most metaethical quietists do not adopt a quietist stance towards substantive questions *within* ethical or normative discourse. This is significant here because quietists often hold that many apparently “metaethical” questions can be interpreted as *merely* raising first-order normative questions. Thus, many quietists draw a distinction between questions that are “internal” to first-order normative debate and those that are, at least in part, “external” to it—with their quietism only applying to (some of) the latter.

As is familiar from similar debates in metametaphysics, drawing such a distinction is no easy task (Eklund 2009; Chalmers 2009). Thus, by making use of it, the quietist is taking on a significant philosophical burden. That said, the rough idea here is familiar enough: The quietist takes a question to be “internal” to ethical or normative discourse if it can be settled *solely* through an appeal to the standards of good ethical or normative reasoning. Thus, the idea here is that whatever you’re doing when you engage in good normative reasoning, that’s all you need to do in order to answer apparently “metaethical” questions that are interpreted “internally.”

Given this, it is best to characterize metaethical quietism, not simply in terms of the rejection of certain metaethical questions, but rather in terms of the rejection of these questions *when they are interpreted in an “external” fashion*:

**Metaethical Quietism:** A view is *metaethically quietist* insofar as it rejects certain metaethical questions as unworthy of philosophical debate, when these questions are interpreted in an “external” fashion.

On this definition, quietism is a matter of degree. The result is a very broad definition of quietism, which catches in its net (at least to some degree) many views that fail to count as “quietist” on other characterizations. For example, compare McPherson’s definition of “quietist realism” (see also Enoch 2011):

Quietist realism is characterized by two claims. On the one hand, it is a form of realism, accepting that there are normative facts and properties. On the other, it suggests that accepting the existence of such facts and properties does not lead to the sort of explanatory burdens (that require metaphysical answers as opposed to substantive normative theorizing).

(2011: 224)

McPherson’s “quietist realism” counts as a form of metaethical quietism in our sense since it rejects certain explanatory questions when these are understood in an external or metaphysical sense. But it is only one instance of quietism in this sense. For example, as we will explore below, many forms of quasi-realism also count as *somewhat* quietist by our standard. This will, we know, seem a mistake to some. After all, while quasi-realists do claim that many apparently metaethical questions are only meaningful insofar as they are given an “internal” or normative reading, they also attempt to *explain* this fact in terms of a systematic account of normative thought and talk.

These further explanatory ambitions might be thought to place the quasi-realist outside of the quietist camp. But this seems to us too quick. After all, even McPherson’s quietist realists—such as Dworkin, Parfit, and Scanlon—generally offer *some* explanation of their rejection of many “external” metaethical questions. And these explanations, like those of the quasi-realists, generally rely on claims about the nature of normative thought and inquiry. So while there is no doubt that the explanatory ambitions of (say) Blackburn and Gibbard go beyond those of Parfit and Scanlon, this difference is more a matter of degree than it might seem (compare Dreier forthcoming-1). In short, if *any* attempt to explain one’s rejection of certain metaethical questions in terms of further metaethical claims is sufficient to disqualify one from the quietist camp, it will be hard to find *any* instances of metaethical quietism. Thus, it seems to us better to think of metaethical quietism as a loose family of views, whose “quietism” is a matter of degree. This helps to illuminate the important commonalities between expressivist, pragmatist, and realist motivations for local quietism. And it has the additional advantage of fitting well with the tendency of some quietists to describe quietism, not as a particular philosophical view, but rather as a general orientation towards, or suspicion of, certain traditional philosophical questions.

### MOTIVATIONS FOR QUIETISM

In this section, we’ll discuss a number of possible motivations for metaethical quietism. But there are other motivations in the literature. And one very general motivation

is worth stressing at the start. Quietists often argue that their view improves on non-quietist alternatives by allowing us to avoid many of the perennial sources of metaethical controversy via giving a “minimal” or “purely internal” reading of the questions that haunt metaethicists (Dworkin 1996). Thus, a very general motivation for quietism is simply the hope of explaining away a sense that the absence of a distinctively metaethical answer to such questions is a philosophical failing. (For this theme in a general philosophical context, see the development of Wittgensteinian themes in McDowell 1996, 1998a, 1998b.)

### Quietism and Meaningfulness

Let us begin with what would perhaps be the simplest and most straightforward motivation for quietism about metaethics. One might simply dismiss metaethical questions because one thinks that such questions lack meaning or sense. This was the motivation behind the logical positivists’ dismissal of many normative questions, as well as many metaphysical questions more generally (Carnap 1935; Ayer 1936). And, as we will see, some forms of contemporary metaethical quietism may be seen as developing this general line of thought. But there is a *prima facie* challenge to such views that explains the rejection of Carnap’s or Ayer’s criteria for meaningfulness. One criterion of success for a theory of meaning is that it counts as intelligible questions which tend to be treated as such by a wide range of competent speakers. In particular, if a wide range of competent speakers are able to engage in what seems like coherent and systematic discussion of metaethical questions, it seems fair to assume—absent of any argument to the contrary—that those questions are intelligible. And a theory of meaning which renders such questions unintelligible thus seems to be, to that extent, defective—unless some further account can be given of why the appearance of meaning in such cases is an illusion.

One way of doing this might be to insist that metaethical questions are posed in terms that are, for reasons that can be explained, systematically misleading. One might say, for example, that questions posed in terms of ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ are of this sort. Call such terms *the culprit terms*. If the quietist could provide an account of the meaning of these terms which shows why certain questions posed in terms of them are unintelligible, and if she could provide a corresponding explanation of why such questions would naturally seem intelligible to a wide range of competent speakers, then the problem just mentioned would not arise. Given such an account, the debate between quietists and their opponents would turn on whether the latter could provide an alternative and independently plausible account of the culprit terms—one that vindicates the intelligibility of the relevant metaethical questions.

### Minimalism and Quietism

A sophisticated version of this line of thought involves distinguishing two uses of the terms in question—the first of which is perfectly meaningful but plays into the quietist’s hands, while the second can only be made meaningful at the cost of losing its metaethical significance. As an example of this strategy, we can consider the case of *generalized minimalism*. According to minimalism about terms like ‘true’, ‘property’, and ‘fact’, the

ordinary meaning of these terms or concepts is exhausted by certain simple patterns of inference. So, for example, on a simple version of these views, the meaning of ‘true’ is exhausted by the inference rule that allows us to move freely between ‘P’ and ‘It is true that P’; and the meaning of ‘fact’ is exhausted by the inference rule that licenses moving between ‘P’ and ‘It is a fact that P’. If an account along these lines is correct, then the ordinary meaning of these terms will be quite minimal, and in general it will add little to the meaning of ‘P’ to say that ‘It is true that P’ or ‘It is a fact that P’. In the normative case, the upshot of this will be that the ordinary meaning of seemingly metaethical claims like ‘It is a fact that murder is wrong’ will be more-or-less equivalent to the meaning of first-order normative claims like ‘Murder is wrong’.

Thus, for the minimalist, the ordinary notions of ‘true’, ‘fact’, ‘belief’ and the like do not provide us with a mechanism for raising metaethical questions that are distinct from first-order normative questions. Instead, these terms only provide us with a mechanism for raising first-order normative questions in a form that would otherwise be impossible. Thus, if these are the only meanings that can be attached to terms like ‘true’ and ‘fact’, we cannot use these terms to raise questions of a *distinctively* metaethical sort. (See Dreier 2004.) For a recent proposal along these lines, see Blackburn (2013) (also Gibbard 2003; Price 2009). Similarly, it often seems charitable to read the references of quietists like Parfit (2011) to a “non-ontological sense” of ‘existence’ or ‘fact’ as referring to a broadly minimalist use of these terms.

Of course, such claims rest on a controversial view of the meaning of terms like ‘true’ and ‘fact’. And even if one accepts that minimalism is the correct theory of our ordinary use of these terms, one could go on to argue that there are *also* more philosophical uses of them that allow us to build more substance into their meaning. If so, while minimalism would show that our ordinary notions of ‘true’ and the like are ill-suited to give meaning to distinctively metaethical questions, this would not show that such questions are meaningless—only that we must look beyond the ordinary notions of ‘true’ and the like to give them meaning. In this way, debates about quietism often develop into debates about *which* concepts to use in doing philosophy (Burgess and Plunkett 2013; Plunkett 2015).

There is, however, a risk in making this move. For if the opponent of quietism gives up on the idea that metaethical questions are concerned with moral truths or facts in the ordinary sense, and insists that such questions are instead invoking a “more philosophical” sense of ‘true’ or ‘fact’, then she needs to explain why those questions are interesting or significant in the ways that metaethical questions are generally assumed to be. (Obviously it would not do, for example, to simply define a notion of truth as *whatever would have been endorsed by Ayer*, and then to pronounce that there are no moral truths.) What the anti-quietist needs here, then, is a notion of ‘true’ or ‘fact’ which is substantial enough to give meaning to distinctively metaethical questions while also preserving their significance. In this way, debates about whether metaethical questions are *intelligible* often lead into debates about whether they are *relevant*.

### Expressivist/Pragmatist Motivations

Closely related ideas can be found in expressivist or pragmatist motivations for quietism. One central commitment of expressivist or pragmatist views about moral practice

is the idea that the best theoretical understanding of moral judgments construes them as something other than representational beliefs—as emotions, practical commitments, or the like. (Note that this is different from saying that such judgments aren't beliefs. The central claim of these views is that we can best *explain* such judgments without appealing to a non-deflationary notion of belief or representation; this is compatible with maintaining that such judgments are beliefs, although as theorists we need to earn the right to say this.) Philosophers who endorse such views sometimes then go on to insist that, given an expressivist or pragmatist understanding of moral practice, any attempt to pose certain sorts of wholly “external” questions about moral reality or truth will amount to a kind of *category mistake*.

The reasoning here goes roughly like this. Suppose that normative judgments are best explained as a kind of practical commitment, so that in the most basic case, judging that you ought now to  $\phi$  is (roughly) deciding to  $\phi$  (Gibbard 2003). Notice, then, that it makes no sense—on this level of description—to ask whether such a judgment is true in the sense of accurately representing the facts. Such judgments are, after all, a kind of decision, and it seems strange to ask whether decisions accurately represent the facts (Dreier 2012). Suppose, next, that we explain other normative judgments in terms of these basic elements (e.g., to judge that you ought to have  $\phi$ ed in circumstances C is (roughly) to adopt a practical commitment to  $\phi$ ing in C), and that we tell a consistent story about how such judgments come to be embedded in complex logical contexts (Blackburn 1998: chapter 3; Gibbard 2003: chapter 4). Finally, suppose that we then tell a story about how various “culprit terms” such as ‘true’ and ‘fact’ come to have a role in all of this (e.g., in thinking about whether to accept Jane’s views on torture, one might ask whether Jane’s views are true, whether they get the facts right, etc.). Then, questions about moral truths, facts, etc. will make sense if they are understood “internally”—e.g., as questions about which practical commitments to adopt—but if such questions are understood “externally” they will involve a kind of category mistake, akin to the mistake involved in asking whether some decision accurately represents the facts.

This line of thought supports a kind of *conditional local quietism*: the idea is that, if one is an expressivist or a pragmatist, *then* the only way to pose the kinds of metaphysical questions that have formed much of the subject matter of metaethics is as first-order normative questions. The case for this kind of quietism thus depends, ultimately, on the case for an expressivist or pragmatist treatment of moral practice. Moreover, since expressivist and pragmatist treatments of moral practice often appeal to a broadly minimalist understanding of the culprit terms (at least insofar as those terms figure in *moral practice*), the work required to sort out these debates will end up overlapping to some extent with the work required to sort out the debates over minimalism that we encountered and left open above. (It is worth noting that a similar line of thought—but one that starts from a constructivist view of normative concepts—seems to lie behind some of Korsgaard’s remarks about metaethics. See, for example, Korsgaard 2008: 322n.44; 1997: 66–7. Compare James 2012, 2013.)

### Moral or Normative Motivations

Before discussing normative motivations for quietism, we should note at the outset that quietism itself may need to be understood as a kind of normative view, if it is going to be

capable of drawing support from normative considerations. Rorty is admirably clear on this point in his introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*:

[P]ragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. ... [T]hey do not think we should ask [Platonic] questions anymore. When they suggest that we not ask questions about the nature of Truth or Goodness, they do not invoke a theory ... which says that “there is no such thing” as Truth or Goodness. They would simply like to change the subject.

(1982: xiv)

There are two important points here. The first is that Rorty uses explicitly normative language to state his view: the idea is that we *should* stop asking certain kinds of questions. The second point is that Rorty does not intend to support this view by appealing to a general theory about the subject matter of those questions (e.g. Truth or Goodness). For Rorty, the essential point is not that these questions make no sense, but that they’re “bad questions,” in the sense that they are at best *utterly unhelpful* and at worst *positively harmful*. As Rorty says in a number of places, there is nothing wrong with talking about facts or “inner representations,” so long as these are not taken to do any explanatory or justificatory work (Rorty 1979: chapter 4). Such talk becomes problematic only when it is understood in a certain way—viz., as issuing the sorts of claims that could be established by engaging in a domain-neutral inquiry, and that could adjudicate debates within or across domains by providing some kind of *grounding* for them. Thus, so long as such talk does no real explanatory or justificatory work, we can regard it as innocuous, but as soon as we try to make it do such work, it becomes not just unhelpful, but misleading and dangerous.

For Rorty this follows in part from the (very controversial) view that, even if we can form a coherent idea of *reality as it exists independently of any representation of it*, or of *the truths that “outstrip” any way of knowing about them*, we lack any way of settling questions about such matters that does not question-beggingly presuppose an answer to them. Thus, Rorty believes that it is useless to ask questions about that world or about those truths, and then to try assessing the “status” of various domains in terms of how well they succeed in representing that world or capturing those truths. The conclusion Rorty draws from this is that there is simply *no point* in preserving the relevant notions of reality and truth in terms of which such questions are posed (1982: xxiv); his claim is that we ought to abandon those notions altogether, and to “extirpate” the philosophical intuitions and puzzles to which they give rise (ibid.: xxxi). An interesting upshot here is that, since Rorty’s position is a normative one—since it is a view about which concepts we ought to use, which questions we ought to try answering, which problems are worth taking seriously, and so on—his opponent needs to defend an opposing normative view. As Rorty puts it, he needs to defend the idea that “the raising of the good old metaphysical problems ... served some good purpose, brought something to light, was important” (ibid.: xxix; cf. 1979: 281). (For an important criticism of Rorty’s view, see Boghossian 2006. For an argument that the world *does* have a metaphysically privileged description, see Sider 2011.)

Another broadly normative motivation for quietism is suggested in Blackburn’s remark that to insist that morality must have an “external” metaphysical grounding is to



express a “defective sensibility” (1993: 156–7). To see how this line of thought might be developed, start with Blackburn’s idea of a sensibility as a kind of “fact-in/attitude-out grinder” (1993: 92). An agent’s sensibility takes in bits of information and churns out various kinds of emotional and practical responses. Particularly important here are those emotions and practical attitudes that an agent needs to have in order to count as *taking morality seriously*. An agent who takes morality seriously presumably feels a certain way about her own moral attitudes and those of other agents; she’s inclined to let these attitudes influence her deliberation; to encourage, admire, and praise the cultivation of such attitudes in herself and others; to resist, oppose, and criticize conflicting attitudes and behavior; and so on.

Now, the way that an agent is disposed to revise these attitudes is also relevant for the moral assessment of her sensibility. Someone who’s inclined to give up taking morality seriously in these ways, upon learning that doing so would bring her fame and fortune, would seem to have a defective sensibility, for example.

So consider someone who’s inclined to give up taking morality seriously upon learning that there are no moral facts in an “external” sense of ‘fact’. The “defective-sensibility” quietist believes that “external” metaethical claims, insofar as they’re genuinely external, should be irrelevant to whether we take morality seriously. He might support this by pointing out what such questions would have to be like, simply in virtue of being “external.” They would have to be the sorts of questions that one could not answer by means of normatively engaged, moral reflection. Given this, the quietist might then say, it would amount to a kind of defect—a defect in one’s moral sensibility—to take the answers to such questions to bear directly on moral matters. In short, the thought goes, such a sensibility would hold moral reflection hostage to the results of non-moral reflection in a morally objectionable manner.

This argument rests on a substantive moral evaluation of the decision to change the way that one relates to one’s moral attitudes on the basis of wholly “external” claims. How could someone find it appropriate to give up, say, the seriousness with which she regards others’ suffering, solely in response to wholly “external” claims? According to Blackburn, she could only do this if “a defective sensibility leads [her] to respect the wrong things”—e.g. if it leads her to respect only those attitudes that have “external” support (ibid.: 156). On the other hand, if someone *doesn’t* think that it would be at all appropriate to stop taking morality seriously upon learning that it has no external grounding, it will be hard to make sense of her as genuinely believing that morality *needs* such a grounding in order to be taken seriously. (See Kremm [ms] for further development of this line of argument.)

### Appeals to the “Fragmentation of Inquiry”

Finally, there are motivations for quietism that appeal to the idea that inquiry is “fragmented” into distinct and more-or-less autonomous domains of thought. This idea has been suggested by Nagel (1986, 1997), Dworkin (1996, 2011), and Scanlon (2003, 2014), among others. According to these philosophers, normative thought is different in kind from, say, thought about the physical world, or thought about mathematical objects, and because of this fundamental normative judgments are *autonomous*, in the sense that they “do not need and could not have” the support of judgments outside of the normative

domain. This means, of course, that if judgments about the existence of normative truths or facts are not understood as being normative judgments (of a suitably abstract kind), they will be incapable of supporting (or undermining) fundamental normative judgments. And if that's right, we would have a strong case for thinking that "external" questions about normative truths or facts are irrelevant to the underlying concerns that were supposed to make them interesting or significant to begin with.

Why do these philosophers think that inquiry is "fragmented" in this way? Unfortunately, they do not address this question directly, so it is somewhat difficult to say. Scanlon says that this is the view that "makes most sense" (2014: 19), and Dworkin says that the alternative "radically misunderstands what value judgments are" (2011: 25). Nonetheless, the basic idea seems to be roughly as follows. Think about the claim that *the butler did it*, and contrast this with the claim that *there is a largest prime number*. These are two different kinds of claim, and they call for different kinds of inquiry. You can't figure out whether the butler did it by going through mathematical proofs, and you can't figure out whether there's a largest prime number by interrogating witnesses from a crime scene. Similarly, the thought goes, for normative claims, such as the claim that we all have reason to want to avoid agony. You can't figure out whether we have such reasons by engaging in anything other than normative inquiry, just as you can't figure out whether there's a largest prime by engaging in anything other than mathematical reasoning. But all of these claims can be cast in "ontological" form, using the existential quantifier (e.g., there exist reasons to want to avoid future agony; there exists a largest prime number; there exists a property of *having done it*, which the butler instantiates). The "fragmentation theorist" will thus insist that these questions, at least on the most fundamental level, need to be settled by domain-specific reasoning; if we can't figure out whether we have reason to avoid future agony by engaging in anything other than normative reasoning, then we can't figure out whether there *exist* such reasons by engaging in metaethical inquiry if this is understood as something distinct from normative inquiry.

For example, Scanlon advocates a kind of *domain-autonomism*, which he illustrates by considering the autonomy of mathematics, taking set theory as his primary example. Scanlon's view takes for granted a plurality of "domains," understood not (in the first instance) in terms of *objects*, but rather in terms of certain kinds of *claims* and associated *concepts* (e.g., mathematics, natural science, practical reasoning). Insofar as these domains license claims that can be expressed using the existential quantifier, they can be said to embody certain ontological commitments. But this notion of an ontological commitment is *domain-specific*. According to Scanlon, all ontological questions are "domain-specific," in the sense that they are to be settled by standards that are internal to the respective domains in which they arise; the standards for existence thus depend on the kind of claim in question. For example, questions such as whether there is an empty set, or whether there are such things as imaginary numbers, are settled by reasoning that is "internal" to the mathematical domain, whereas questions about whether there are magnetic fields are settled by reasoning that's internal to the domain of natural science. Crucially, these standards are not *merely* epistemic in character—they determine, not just when we are justified in making some claim, but also whether this claim is true or false. Thus, there is a sense in which the "universe" over which we quantify is fundamentally disjunctive for Scanlon. (Compare McDaniels 2009.) In short, for Scanlon, *what there is* is only as unified as our discourse or inquiry into what there is.

Importantly, Scanlon allows that we could conduct a kind of domain-neutral inquiry into “everything we are committed to quantifying over in a range of particular domains,” but he thinks that this sort of inquiry would not have much of a point, since the general idea of existence *as such* is not capable of providing any “bases for standards of existence beyond those of ... particular domains” (24). Against this, one might emphasize the importance of giving a unified explanation of all of these varied domains. But, to some degree at least, Scanlon takes the project of unifying these various domains to be *pointless* because he believes that there are no determinate standards for its success or failure. (There are many reasonable questions one might raise about this approach—for some discussion of the issues here, see Enoch and McPherson [forthcoming] and Dreier [forthcoming-1].)

Dworkin, on the other hand, emphasizes the autonomy of *interpretive* domains, such as Constitutional law and literary criticism (Dworkin 2011: part 2). For reasons of space, we’ll leave the complexities of Dworkin’s views to the side. What we do want to stress about both Scanlon and Dworkin is that their motivations end up coinciding to a perhaps surprising degree with those of expressivists and pragmatists. As we have seen, according to Scanlon, all ontological questions are to be understood as “domain-specific,” in the sense that they are to be settled by standards that are internal to the respective domains in which they arise; the standards for existence thus depend on the kind of claim in question. Similarly, according to Dworkin, truth is simply “what counts as the uniquely successful solution to a challenge of inquiry,” and different kinds of inquiry pose different kinds of challenges (e.g., scientific inquiry poses a different kind of challenge from interpretive inquiry, of which moral inquiry is a species) (2011: 177).

These claims—that there is a plurality of autonomous “domains of inquiry,” and that truth is the name of a “uniquely successful solution” to a “challenge” in one of those domains—can be read in a variety of ways. Following Wright (1996), one could see them as an endorsement of a form of anti-realism or constructivism about normative truths, on which the standards of normative reasoning are prior to and explain the correct answers to normative questions (Korsgaard 2008; Schafer 2015). But in making such claims of explanatory priority, this view would be “less quietist” than what Scanlon or Dworkin intend. So it seems more apt to understand these claims as similar in spirit to those made by the pragmatist above. Indeed, as Dworkin himself points out, these claims depend on accepting “what Wittgenstein pointed out: that concepts are tools and that we have different kinds of tools in our conceptual toolbox” (ibid. 160). (Cf. Scanlon’s claim that not all domains “aim at the same kinds of understanding” [2014: 27].) This yields an explanation of quietism somewhat similar to that given by pragmatists: if truth is the successful solution to a challenge of inquiry, we have to engage in that kind of inquiry in order to figure out whether there’s any such thing. Whether there is such a thing as moral truth is thus, for Dworkin, a question of whether we can successfully solve the challenges of moral interpretation. And whether there exist such things as reasons is, for Scanlon, a normative question about whether there are any possible features of an agent’s circumstances which might count in favor of her adopting some attitude.

Importantly, both of these moves depend on a particular understanding of moral or normative judgment, as well as a particular understanding of truth and ontological commitment. Thus, Dworkin’s and Scanlon’s forms of quietism should only be attractive insofar as we find this understanding of truth in ethics preferable to the more explanatorily

ambitious forms of realism, constructivism, and expressivism on the metaethical market. Indeed, as one presses Dworkin and Scanlon to explain their view, there is a temptation to think that their views occupy a fundamentally instable position in the metaethical landscape. For example, in his related discussion of truth in ethics, Nagel writes:

The connection between objectivity and truth is ... closer in ethics than it is in science. I do not believe that the truth about how we should live *could* extend radically beyond any capacity we might have to discover it ... .

(1986: 139)

At first glance, this seems an odd use of ‘objectivity’ on Nagel’s part. After all, one might have thought that one of the central marks of an objective truth is precisely that it *is* independent from our capacities of discovery in the way that Nagel here seems to be denying for ethical truth. But if there is such a difference between truths about ethics and, say, scientific truths, it is natural to expect some explanation of this difference (Svavarsdóttir 2001; James 2012; Schafer 2015; Enoch and McPherson forthcoming). And much the same might be said of the special connection between judgments about ethics and motivation (Dreier forthcoming-1 and -2). The problem here is that such an explanation seems to require the endorsement of a form of realism or constructivism or expressivism that goes beyond the quietism we find in Dworkin or Scanlon. Thus, whether or not we find their quietism compelling will depend a good deal on how much we expect our metaethical theories to explain.

### OBJECTIONS TO QUIETISM

There are a number of important objections to philosophical quietism in the literature. For example, Zangwill (1992) has argued that local quietism requires global quietism, which (in turn) is untenable. And a number of authors have suggested that philosophical quietism of this general sort is somehow self-defeating (Cassam 1986). But for reasons of space, we will focus here on objections that target *metaethical* quietism in particular. The most important of these are what we might call *symmetry arguments*, which attempt to show that, if we accept the quietist view, we will be unable to distinguish the normative domain from other “normative-ish” domains that seem defective or problematic in some way (McPherson 2011; Enoch 2011).

Enoch gives the example of a linguistic community engaged in what he calls “counter-reasons discourse” (compare McPherson’s “schmeasoners”). These people judge, for instance, that the fact “that an action will cause the agent pain is counter-reason *for* performing it,” and they “treat counter-reasons much as we treat reasons,” e.g., they tend to do what they think there’s counter-reason to do, to criticize those who don’t do what they have counter-reason to do, and so on (124–5). Enoch then points out that, in just the same way that the “internal standards” of the normative domain license claims about the existence of reasons, normative truths, facts, and so on, the “internal standards” of the counter-normative domain also license claims about the existence of counter-reasons, counter-normative truths, facts, and so on. So by the quietist’s lights it would seem that, just as we are entitled to believe that there are such things as reasons (etc.), so too

the counter-reasoners are entitled to believe that there are such things as counter-reasons (etc.). But intuitively, it seems the counter-reasoners are making some kind of mistake when they go in for this practice; counter-normative discourse seems to be defective in a way that normative discourse isn't. The problem for the quietist is to explain this.

The natural response to this for the quietist is to give a normative explanation of the sense in which the counter-reasons practice is defective. What's wrong with the counter-reasoners is (roughly speaking) that they aren't responsive to *reasons* in the right ways. After all, they treat the fact that an action would cause someone pain as a reason for performing it; of course, they don't *say* that it's a reason—they call it a “counter-reason”—but they still treat it as a reason, in the sense of giving it a certain weight in their decisions about what to do, and this is the sense in which their practice is defective. We shouldn't weigh the fact that an action would cause someone pain in favor of performing that action, and we shouldn't criticize people for failing to perform actions that would cause them pain. More generally, the problem with the counter-reasons practice is that engaging in that practice requires people to do all sorts of things that they shouldn't be doing. That's the rough idea behind the quietist's *normative* response to the symmetry arguments. (An alternative response here would be to insist that the counter-reasoners aren't really conceivable after all. For a version of this line of thought, see Stroud 1965.)

Not surprisingly, for Enoch and McPherson, this reply is inadequate. As Enoch points out, while we can offer a normative criticism of the counter-reasoners, the counter-reasoners can make a parallel claim about us:

Of course, [counter-reasons] are not as *normatively* respectable as reasons are. And so those acting on them are to be criticized for not acting on the reasons that apply to them. But then again, reasons aren't as *counter-normatively* respectable as counter-reasons are, and we may be counter-criticizable for failing to act on the counter-reasons that apply to us.

(2011: 125)

So, while there is a *normative* asymmetry between reasons and counter-reasons, this asymmetry is matched by a corresponding *counter-normative* asymmetry in the opposite direction. In short, then, the normative asymmetry between reasons and counter-reasons is part of a larger, higher-order symmetry between reasons and counter-reasons.

Once again, our sense is that many quietists (rightly or wrongly) will be unconcerned by this—for they will feel that a *normative* asymmetry between reasons and counter-reasons is all we should have wanted in the first place, and that these further forms of symmetry do not take away from the normative significance of this asymmetry. Quite simply, for the quietist realist, this normative difference between reasons and counter-reasons gives us everything we should want.<sup>1</sup>

All that having been said, it will seem to many non-quietists that we can better capture the intuitive asymmetry between these two domains by turning to a more metaphysically committal form of normative realism. This is just what Enoch and McPherson (forthcoming) suggest. There they argue that only such a form of realism “can say that only the reasoners—and not the schmeasoners [or counter-reasoners]—track the normative structure of reality.” That is to say, the metaphysically committed realist can appeal to the truth of an external, ontological claim—viz., that reasons exist and counter-reasons don't—in

order to explain the sense in which reasons discourse is “better” than counter-reasons discourse. Since this isn’t an internal normative claim—but rather an “external” metaphysical or semantic claim—it can’t be mirrored by a parallel counter-normative claim in the way that caused problems for the quietist.

Here the quietist is likely to respond by asking whether anything is really gained by this explanation. Is it true that we need to be able to give an external, ontological or semantic explanation of the difference between reasons and counter-reasons? In fact, is such an explanation even possible? The denial of its possibility would be natural if, following Scanlon, we believed that the standards of truth and falsity for normative questions are internal to the domain of normative inquiry. If something like this were true, then questions about the aptness of some system of concepts for describing reality would only acquire determinate answers when viewed within the context of (say) normative inquiry—a sort of inquiry that, for Scanlon, is already structured around certain substantive norms. Thus, Scanlon might insist that the activity of trying to answer such questions only makes sense insofar as they are seen as “internal” to the normative domain.

Indeed, following Blackburn’s discussion, we might wonder here whether the search for such an explanation is even appropriate in this case. After all, we will only think that facts about metaphysics or ontology will settle these issues if we think that normative questions should ultimately be sensitive to metaphysics in the manner Enoch and McPherson suggest. And it was this sort of claim that Blackburn objected to above as indicative of a “distorted normative sensibility.” So at this stage the quietist may feel—not just that Enoch and McPherson’s explanation is no improvement on quietism—but indeed that that explanation is objectionable on normative grounds (Kremm [ms]; compare Erdur 2015).

In short, then, what seems to Enoch and McPherson to be a fatal problem with the quietist view may well seem to the quietist to be one of its main advantages. In this way, the debate here is not merely about *how* a particular problem in metaethics is best solved, but also about *whether* some aspect of the quietist’s view is really a problem at all. Once again, this points to the meta-metaethical character of these debates. For what is at issue here is not just the truth about metaethical questions, but also what the terms of success in metaethics, and so the preferred metaethical methodology, should look like in the first place.

### QUIETISM AND PHILOSOPHICAL METHODOLOGY

Quietist views are often rejected simply because they seem to be “first and foremost expressions of impatience” (Enoch 2011: 132; cf. Zangwill 1996). This charge is surely fair against some forms of quietism. But many arguments for quietism are less “impatient” or “lazy” than they might at first seem. Rather, they rely on positive theorizing about the nature of normative thought and talk that is quite substantial and controversial in its own right. Of course, this opens these arguments to a variety of objections—including the objection that they are “less quietist” about these issues than they claim to be—but it also makes it harder to dismiss quietism as the expression of a simple distaste for (say) metaphysical theorizing.

Thus, even if quietists need to “earn the right” to their quietism, either through argument or through the sort of “Wittgensteinian therapy” associated with Rorty and

McDowell, it remains an open question whether such attempts might succeed, at least with respect to some of the forms of quietism noted above (Mulhall 2002). And more fundamentally, there is the question of whether quietism might sometimes be the appropriate default attitude to take to certain philosophical questions. At this point, there is often a fundamental methodological gap between quietists and their opponents about the place of explanation within a proper conception of philosophy.

This is just one instance of a more general feature of debates about quietism—namely, the manner in which they bring to the fore deep assumptions that structure the methodology of different schools within contemporary metaethics. This often makes it difficult to discuss these issues without begging the question against one side of the debate. To borrow a quote from Rorty, this may well be “one of those issues which puts everything up for grabs at once” (1982: xliii). Of course, the degree to which this is true will depend in part on how global a philosopher’s quietism is. But even local quietists tend to challenge the basic methodological assumptions behind the way the contemporary “metaethics game” is played. Thus, while engagement with quietism can be frustrating, it can also promote reflection on the assumptions which structure our philosophical theorizing—a sort of reflection that is often difficult to achieve from within more local metaethical debates.

#### NOTE

1. As such, it would be a mistake to confuse this view with the sort of “deflationary normative pluralism” that rejects the claim that there is any “free unsubscripted” sense of ‘ought’ or ‘reason’ that has special significance in a normative context (Tiffany 2007). In short, to say that reasons and counter-reasons are structurally on a par is not, for the quietist, to treat them as having the same sort of *normative* significance.

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#### RELATED TOPICS

Chapter 5, “Metaethical Expressivism;” Chapter 16, “Conceptual Role Accounts of Meaning in Metaethics;” Chapter 27, “The Autonomy of Ethics;” Chapter 37, “Pragmatism and Metaethics;” Chapter 43, “Normative Ethics and Metaethics.”

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