

QUIETISM AND COUNTER-NORMATIVITY

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Meta-ethical quietists hold that only ethically-relevant considerations may bear on which ethical views to accept. Since the metaphysics of moral properties, the semantics of moral terms, and so forth, are generally not ethically relevant, they generally do not bear on whether to accept any particular ethical view, whether to drop our ethical beliefs wholesale, and so on. The quietist, then, rejects “external” or “sideways-on” vindications of ethics and ethical objectivity. In recent years, David Enoch (2011) and Tristram McPherson (2011) have offered an objection to quietist objectivism that turns this insistence on abjuring “external” vindications against the theory. They imagine alternative, “counter-normative” standards that conflict with ours—a standard of what we have “schmeason” to do, for instance, rather than what we have reason to do. To vindicate ethical objectivity, one would have to show why the “reasons”-standard is somehow privileged over the “schmeasons” standard. Enoch and McPherson argue that quietism cannot step outside the discourse of “reasons” in the way that’d be required to show this. In this paper, I explain how the quietist ought to respond to the “counter-normativity” challenge.

1. Introduction

Meta-ethical quietists think that only those considerations that matter by the lights of the correct account of first-order ethics—for example, utilitarianism, contractualism, whatever it may be—may bear on which ethical views to accept. Since the metaphysics of moral properties, the semantics of moral terms, and so forth, are generally assigned no relevance by the lights of the plausible first-order ethical theories, they would seem to be generally irrelevant to which ethical views to accept.

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Some philosophers are quietists because they harbour doubts about the intelligibility or settleability of “external” or “sideways-on” metaphysical or semantic questions (Dworkin 1996; McDowell 1979; 1987). Others believe that these fields are irrelevant to which ethical judgments to adopt because these judgments are not ordinary beliefs (Blackburn 1993). Still others resist metaphysical or semantic incursions into ethics on grounds that are themselves ethical, or at least evaluative (Erdur 2016; Kremm 2020; Rorty 1991).

For what it’s worth, I put myself in the third category. More specifically: I think that pure normative-ethical disputes are in certain respects akin to William James’s classic example of the two hikers debating whether a man chasing a squirrel around the tree is thereby going *around the squirrel*. Some would call disputes like this “merely verbal” or “non-substantive”, but I prefer to think of them in evaluative terms: They afford no paradigmatically “representational” values. Since metaphysics and semantics can generally bear on which beliefs to adopt only insofar as they bear on the representational value of accepting those beliefs, metaphysics and semantics are generally irrelevant to which ethical beliefs we ought to accept. But whereas one wants to say that “you can go either way” in James’s “squirrel” debate—that “it doesn’t matter”—I’d want to say of many pure normative-ethical disputes that it *does* matter which “way” you “go”, because while there are no representational values at stake, there are *ethical* values at stake. It’s in this sense, then, that only ethically-relevant considerations can bear on which ethical views to accept (see Sepielli 2018b; 2020a; 2020b).

Of all of the objections to quietism, one in particular has managed to cut through the brush in recent years. This is largely because, far from painting the familiar picture of the quietist as promising the impossible, this objection allows that she delivers on most of her promises, before turning these very deliverances against her. This is the so-called “counter-reasons” or “schmeasons” objection. It is an objection specifically to versions of quietism that aspire to be realist/objectivist about ethics, and has been raised in different forms by David Enoch and by Tristram McPherson (See Enoch 2011: Ch. 5; McPherson 2011; Enoch and McPherson 2017). It is of a piece with recent work on “alternative normative concepts” and “conceptual engineering” by people like Matti Eklund, Sally Haslanger, Herman Cappelen, Jared Riggs, and David Plunkett and Alexis Burgess.¹

Enoch imagines another linguistic community in which people navigate the world using the concept of a “counter-reason” rather than that of a reason:

Those engaged in that discourse treat counter-reasons much as we treat reasons. For instance, they take them to be relevant to their practical

1. See, respectively: Eklund (2017), Haslanger (2000), Cappelen (2018), Riggs (2019), Plunkett and Burgess (2013).

deliberation, or perhaps counter-deliberation, in roughly the same way we take reasons to be relevant to ours: when they judge that there is a counter-reason to ϕ , they tend to ϕ , to criticize those who do not ϕ , and so on. But their judgments about counter-reasons would sound very weird to us (once translated into reasons-talk). For instance, they think that it is rather obvious that that an action will cause the agent pain is counter-reason for performing it. (2011: 124–125)

McPherson likewise writes of a “schmeasons *standard*”, which we can distinguish from the “reasons standard” just as “we can distinguish the rules of chess from those of [an alternative game] *schmess*”. He tells us that the “schmeasons standard is “ ‘disutilitarian’: one has schmeason to A just to the extent that A-ing will increase the net suffering in the world” (McPherson 2011: 232–233).

It’s sometimes taken for granted in meta-ethics that the existence of mind-independent practical reasons would suffice for ethical objectivity, but Enoch and McPherson argue otherwise. For suppose, first, that there are not only reasons, but also schmeasons. Suppose further that, as both authors suggest, the reasons and schmeasons standards can conflict. And suppose, finally, that there is no way to step outside the standpoint of either of these standards and explain how one is more authoritative than the other—in the way that, say, the reasons standard is more authoritative than the standards of basketball.

Were all of this true, then there would be no satisfactory account of how we’re responding to normative reality better than the members of Enoch’s alternative linguistic community are. Nor would there be any satisfactory way of answering a pressing question that is more distinctly practical than that of what I have reason to do, or what I ought to do—namely, the question of simply *what to do*.² So I’m with Enoch and McPherson in thinking that, for ethics to be objective, at least one of aforementioned suppositions must be false.

Both authors think that the quietist cannot account for the falsity of any of them, in which case, she would have trouble maintaining that ethics is objective. The crux of the difficulty is that the quietist insists on explaining everything “internally”—from within the discourse about reasons or rights or “ought.” But here it seems as though, to vindicate objectivity, one must adopt an external standpoint—either to show that there are no schmeasons after all, or else to explain, in a way that doesn’t simply judge the “schmeasons” standard by the lights of the “reasons” standard, why schmeasons are somehow less privileged or authoritative than reasons are. For what it’s worth, Enoch himself opts for the first strategy, and McPherson for the second. That is, Enoch wants to say

2. For a nice discussion of the nature of this distinctly practical question, see Hieronymi (2009).

primarily that counter-reasons don't exist (Enoch 2011: 125), while McPherson suggests that the schmeasons standard is less authoritative than the reasons one is because the former does not pick out a robustly normative *property* (McPherson 2011: 234, fn. 31).

So that is the objection. Again, unlike many challenges to quietism, it does not involve denying that the quietist can account for reasons, even mind-independent ones. In an act of philosophical judo, it turns quietism's characteristic anti-skepticism against the view: "Suppose you're right, Professor Quietist, that we can't step outside of 'reasons' discourse and call it all into question at once. Fine. Then we can't do that with 'schmeasons' discourse, either, and so your pretensions to objectivity simply fail in a new, different way!"

My aim here is to offer a quietist reply to the "schmeasons" objection.

First, though, I want to say a few things to manage the reader's expectations. My response will not be theoretically neutral. It will depend on premises that are consistent with quietism, but perhaps not with every other meta-ethical view. I can't see why this would be objectionable, for the interesting question is whether the "schmeasons" challenge represents a sound *independent* argument against quietism, not whether it can succeed given assumptions that would doom quietism all by themselves.

Second, one part of the response will draw on a theory of normative authority that I've developed elsewhere. I will explain the theory and briefly elaborate on its strengths, but I will not completely re-hash the arguments for it. It's not my aim here to defend my theory of authority against all possible objections; rather, I simply wish to offer a plausible, illuminating, quietist-friendly reply to the challenge of counter-normativity.

Third, while my response is consistent with quietism itself, I do not imagine that it will be fully consistent with every *argument* that every quietist has ever offered in defence of that view, let alone with what every one of them has said about meta-ethics in general. For example, there are ways of interpreting parts of T. M. Scanlon's "domain"-based argument for quietism that provide "aid and comfort," we might say, to the "schmeasons" challenge. Some of what I'll say here will be inconsistent with *those* parts, *so interpreted*. Are these interpretations of Scanlon correct? I'm not sure. If they are, then we should reject Scanlon's argument even as we embrace its conclusion. I'm on the hook for quietism, certainly, but not for the routes that particular quietists (other than myself) take to get there—and still less for their extraneous pronouncements.

My argument will proceed as follows. I'm going to assume for argument's sake that no ethical concept is *thinner*, in a sense I'll soon explicate, than the concept of a normative reason. I assume this purely for continuity of terminology between myself and Enoch and McPherson. If you believe—as, indeed,

I ultimately do—that some other concept is thinner, then feel free to substitute that concept for “reason” in what follows.

There are three relevant epistemic possibilities:

- (a) “Reasons” and “schmeasons” are *equally* thin, and both concepts are, in a sense I’ll soon explicate, *completely* thin.
- (b) “Reasons” is *thinner* than “schmeasons” is.
- (c) “Reasons” and “schmeasons” are *equally* thin, but neither concept is *completely* thin.

I will argue that, if (a), then the reasons and schmeasons standards cannot conflict. If (b), the standards *can* conflict, but the reasons standard is more *authoritative* than the schmeasons standard is. Either way, the possibility of counter-normative concepts poses no threat to the quietist’s ability to account for true ethical objectivity.

If (c) obtains, then it is true that the quietist cannot “give us” genuine ethical objectivity. But I do not regard this as a defeat. For one thing, I will show that (c) is highly implausible. Since the posture of one who calls herself a “quietist objectivist” should simply be that she can deliver objectivism *given plausible background suppositions*, the mere conceptual possibility of an implausible background supposition like (c) is no threat. Additionally, I will argue that the non-quietist realist must adopt a similar posture. Someone like McPherson, say, who wants to appeal to the apparatus of metaphysical eliteness/robustness to vindicate objectivity in the face of alternative normative concepts, can do so *only if* there is such a thing as eliteness, and only if one of “reasons” and “schmeasons” is more elite than the other.

2. The First Possibility: “Reasons” and “Schmeasons” Are Equally Thin, and Both Are Completely Thin

The thinness/thickness of a concept is a matter of the degree to which the concept’s constitutive “sense” or “cognitive significance”³ implicates non-evaluative concepts. A concept may be thick, on the ordinary understanding, in virtue of being party *analyzable* in terms of non-evaluative concepts.⁴ But there are constitutive relationships between concepts other than *analysandum-analysans*, and

3. See Frege (1892).

4. Daniel Elstein and Tom Hurka provide two very plausible “plans” for how to analyze thick concepts in this manner in Elstein and Hurka (2009).

so I prefer to make the notions of “sense” and “cognitive significance” more precise by speaking more broadly, as many others have, of constitutive “inferential roles.”⁵

The ordinary understanding of thinness, best expressed, would characterize a concept as completely thin just in case it is not constitutive of that concept that any inferences to/from beliefs that contain it from/to non-evaluative beliefs are truth-preserving. It characterizes a concept as thick to some “non-zero” degree—that is, not completely thin—if it *is* constitutive of that concept that some such inferences are truth-preserving. It is consistent with an ethical concept’s being completely thin that the truth-preservingness or rationality of certain *other* mental or discursive transitions is constitutive of it. Specifically, a completely thin ethical concept may be constitutively inferentially linked with *other evaluative concepts* in the manner just suggested, and may be constitutively *non-inferentially* linked with other mental states which it rationalizes—for example, with desires, preferences, motivations to act, emotions, and so on.

As I said, that is the *ordinary understanding*. For reasons having to do with my quietism, I prefer to think of thin/thick-ness in a slightly different way. Let’s distinguish between the claim that the *truth-preservingness* or *rationality* of some mental transition is constitutive of a concept, and the claim that a concept-possessor’s *actually executing* some mental transition, at least under “preferred” conditions, is constitutive of it. I want to characterize thin/thick-ness in terms of claims of the latter sort. An evaluative concept is thick, on my understanding, just in case at least some actual inferences between beliefs that contain it and beliefs involving non-evaluative concepts are constitutive of that concept: one must execute them (or not, as the case may be) in the preferred conditions in order to count as employing the concept at all.

It’s my view, in keeping with my quietism, that allegedly constitutive roles of the “truth-preserving” or “rationalizing” sort should not be taken to bear on which ethical views to accept; this is because they are generally ethically irrelevant. To put things flatfootedly but, I think, revealingly: meaning-facts don’t make actions right or wrong; pain-, autonomy-, and equality-facts do. Taking conceptual roles of this sort into account in reasoning to an ethical conclusion, then, is apt to be distortive at best. As for constitutive roles of the actual, psychological sort of the ones that make up thick concepts as I understand them: it’s neither the case that we should or that we shouldn’t take them into account, at least as far as seeking truth and shunning error is concerned. For we do not risk misapplying a concept by failing to reason in keeping with constitutive roles of the sort; rather, we simply make it the case that we are not applying that concept

5. See, among many, many others, Sellars (1954), Field (1977), Brandom (1994), Wedgwood (2007).

in the first place. Nor do we risk misapplying the concept by reasoning in accordance with them; for it is only by doing so that we can apply the concept at all. That is to say, questions of “should” aside, I *do* take such roles into account when applying any concepts of which they are constitutive. Since I wish to employ some such concepts in this paper—both because I wish to engage with possible claims my opponents may make, and for other reasons—I will sometimes end up adverting to constitutive roles of this sort.

Now I want to argue that, if “reasons” and “schmeasons” are both completely thin and indeed are true alternatives, then they are necessarily coextensive; the reasons and schmeasons standards cannot conflict. I’ll start by giving a *brief* explanation of why this is, just so you get a feel for how the quietist ought to approach these issues. Then I’ll fill out the details of my approach a bit, through an explanation of how, consistently with quietism, one can move from one’s *grasp* of a completely thin ethical concept to its *extension*. Finally, I’ll say something about how my approach contrasts with others’ approaches.

How should a quietist like me explain the correct application of “reason”? Not by assigning relevance to a semantic theory of how “reason” (or any other term or concept) refers, or a metaphysical theory of how reasons reduce, but rather by engaging in ordinary, first-order ethical theory—more specifically, the theory of reasons. I would consult my ethical intuitions, both about particular cases and about general principles; I’d try to reconcile them, and weigh competing claims; I’d try to assess myself *qua* discoverer of reasons, taking into account those criteria that seem to matter by my first-order ethical lights—my powers of empathy, my ability to abstract, my general intelligence, and so on. I might conclude all of this inquiry by coming to believe, among many other things, that I have reason not to cause pain to innocents, that reasons of partiality depend on shared positive histories, or what-have-you. What I would *not* do, of course, is to take into account constitutive connections between the concept of a reason and non-evaluative concepts, since—we’re now assuming—there *are* no such rules.

And what about “schmeason”? Well, in order for “schmeason” to be in the running to count as a genuine *alternative* to “reason”—rather than simply a *different concept* like “good” or “bad”—it’d have to occupy the same roles *vis-a-vis* motivation that “reason” occupies for us. Relatedly, it’s got to have a psychological role that distinguishes it from a concept that works like “good” works for us. (For example, “good” is perhaps not as directly linked to motivation, but is linked with satisfaction and approval.) For if “schmeason” is not a strict alternative in the sense that its tokening also directly influences motivation, then McPherson’s and Enoch’s worries do not get off the ground. That different normative or evaluative concepts work in different ways is, by itself, no threat to objectivity.

Understanding the complete psychological role it plays—both in connection with motivation, etc., and *vis-a-vis* other evaluative concepts, suffices to *fully grasp* the concept of a schmeason—again, assuming that it, like reason, is completely thin. And once I grasp it, I am in a position to explain how it applies by appealing to my best first-order ethical theory of how an ethical concept like that applies. I'll say, for instance, that I have a schmeason not to cause harm to innocents, that schmeasons of partiality depend on shared positive histories, and so on—that is, just what I'd say about reasons. In this case, then, there can be no conflict. I do not deduce this absence of a conflict from facts about the definition or reference of “schmeason”, but rather from ethical facts. It's through ethical theory that I discover that I've necessarily got reason to do such-and-such actions, and it's through ethical theory that I discover that I've necessarily got schmeason to do, well, just the same actions. The question of how, *exactly*, to do ethical theory is another matter, and I suppose there are many plausible accounts thereof. My only claim here is that, given the ways in which “schmeason” mirrors, or serves as an alternative to, “reason”—playing the same roles in thought and action, for instance—any plausible account is going to say that what we have reason to do is just what we have schmeason to do.

Now, perhaps the members of Enoch's imagined community would disagree with all of this, but then it simply seems to me that they are wrong. They are mis-applying “schmeason,” just as people who are in the grip of the wrong theory of reasons will mis-apply “reason”. Their patterns of use of “schmeason” are altogether beside the point unless these bear on the values of actions in the way that, for example, pleasure and pain, autonomy, and equality might—which I think they surely do not. (Again, we've not yet distinguished what it is to bear in this way; that will come later.) I cannot *show* that they are wrong in some “neutral” way that prescind from normative ethics and relies only on claims about the metaphysics of values or moral semantics, but that is just a commitment of quietism. My task in this paper is simply to respond to the “schmeasons” challenge, not to reply to other, independent objections to quietism.

Still, there is a *lacuna* in what I've said so far. For I've said that in order to be in a position to see how a normative concept applies, one must *fully grasp* that concept. Only then can immaculate first-order ethical reasoning take you to an extension. And that is what anyone, quietist or otherwise, should say—that successful theorizing about X's may be conducted only by those who *at least understand* the notion “X”. One might want to hear more, then, about how, exactly, grasping a particular thin concept puts those skilled in evaluative reasoning in a position to discern its extension. For we can easily see how such an explanation might go in the case where grasping a concept involves something like *knowing its definition*. But how would the quietist go about getting to a normative

concept's conditions of correct application to the world, described in non-evaluative terms, *without* a definition of that concept in non-evaluative terms, using only that concept's causal links with other evaluative concepts and with things like motivations, the emotions, and so on?

Well, when the concept is "schmeasons" — which, we're assuming for the moment is perfectly thin, and a genuine alternative to "reasons" — our first-pass story might go like this: Grasping the concept helps because it's through so doing that we see that it is, in its non-inferential role, just like "reasons," and just like "reasons" in the non-inferential roles of *the other normative or evaluative concepts* with which it is *inferentially* linked. And so we can say something like this: "There's some kind of an explanation—a first-order ethical explanation—for why a concept that works like 'reasons' does applies as it does. Now that I see that 'schmeasons' has the same roles, I can infer that it has the same pattern of application." But of course this just pushes the more fundamental question further back. What we really want is to explain, without appealing to the conditions of correct application of a thin concept's "alternative," how such a concept applies.

For illustration's sake, then, let's focus on the thin ethical concept of the all-things-considered "ought," which we shall assume works something like this: If I believe that I all-things-considered ought to do A, then I will always either be motivated to do A or else experience a feeling of (let's just simplify and say) *regret* if I'm not so motivated. Other normative or evaluative concepts may also enjoy some kind of causal link with motivation, but it will be less direct or more context-dependent. How can apprehending this causal role of "ought" be of any use in applying it? Again, it would not be hard to answer this question were "ought" connected with some non-evaluative concepts in roughly the way that "bachelor" is connected with "male" and "unmarried." But because "ought," we're assuming here, is completely thin like "reasons" and "schmeasons," it may seem less clear how to answer this challenge.

I would want to answer it by suggesting that a person may "work backwards" from "ought" 's direct, context-independent causal link with motivation to an account of *what kinds of reasoning* one would have to engage in to yield a conclusion that gave rise to motivation in just this manner. Then one might employ this sort of reasoning, which will be informed by one's first-order evaluative theory, to find out what, indeed, one ought to do. (Again, *mutatis mutandis* for "reasons," "schmeasons," and so on.) Suppose, just for illustration's sake, that relevant general kind of reasoning goes like this: I find that I have positive desires and emotions concerning C, D, and E, and negative desires and emotions towards F, G, and H, all of which I regard as in some way connected to an action under consideration, A. There is some kind of procedure that I might perform on the *objects* of my desires and emotions, which may involve staples of

moral theorizing like weighing, abduction, explaining away, “silencing,” subsumption, and all of that, that lead to a conclusion capable of having the motivational role that I’ve identified for “ought”-thoughts. Another procedure—one that takes into account *just* C, D, F, and G and excludes *in advance* E and H, say—may yield a conclusion (say, involving a *thick* ethical concept) that has some motivational purchase, but will not yield one capable of motivating across all contexts of decision as “ought”-conclusions can. Having homed in on the kind of operations I’d need to do to feel as though I’d settled the practical question as “ought”-conclusions seem to settle it, I can perform those operations. That is to say, I can engage in reasoning about what I ought to do. If I am good at first-order ethical reasoning, I may well arrive at correct conclusions about what I ought to do; if I’m bad at it, I likely won’t, but will be motivated all the same. And without getting into what good ethical reasoning looks like, exactly, that’s all the quietist *can* say.

Of course, most of us longtime users of “ought” don’t need to “work backwards” like this when we apply the concept. In trying to determine, say, whether turning the trolley is what we ought to do, we simply consult our other ethical “intuitions”—for example, that *ceteris paribus*, we ought to do what yields pleasure and not what yields pain, and so on, and so on. If we grant that “ought” is a completely thin concept, we do this without supposing that it’s constitutive of this concept that this or any other intuition involving it is correct. But we’d want to tell a different story about a new (for us) concept like “schmeasons.” In that case, it’d be absurd to say that we can be in a position to engage in successful theorizing about it without first grasping it, without understanding the notion; but then, given that grasping/understanding puts us in this position, we’d want a story about *why* it does that. My story, again, is that we can find out its extension by engaging in practical reasoning of the sort that is required to yield a conclusion that manifests whatever non-inferential roles our grasp of “schmeasons” consists in accepting.

It may be helpful to contrast my strategy so far with some responses that Tim Scanlon and Matti Eklund have offered. Scanlon writes: “These imagined conclusions about ‘counter-reasons’ conflict with our conclusions about reasons only insofar as they are interpreted as conclusions about reasons” (2014: 29). Eklund at least *floats* the suggestion that there is no conflict because “normative roles” of thin concepts like “reason” (and “schmeason”) are “reference determining,” and “alternatives” like these two concepts have the same normative role (2017: Chs. 2–3).

Scanlon’s phrase “conclusions about reasons” is ambiguous. It might mean “conclusions employing a concept, whether it is the concept of a reason or not, that picks out reasons”, or it might mean “conclusions employing the concept of a reason”. If it is the former, then Scanlon would have to provide some

explanation of why this concept does, in fact, pick out reasons. He does not do this explicitly. The story I've told so far, however, would seem to fit the bill. If it is the latter, then, while I do not disagree with Scanlon, I needn't agree with him, either. My argument so far does not rely on the claim that "reasons" and "schmeasons" are the same concept, nor that they belong to the same "domain". Finally, even if we put aside the concept of a schmeason, my argument raises to salience the need to explain how one's grasp of the concept of a reason or of "ought" plays a role in coming to know its extension. Scanlon, however, never provides such an explanation.

Eklund, who does not identify as a quietist or lightweight realist, characterizes his suggestion as "beholden to controversial claims in general philosophy of language" (2017: 152), and so of course, as someone who does identify as a quietist, I'd want to reject it. I don't think that we should allow our views about reasons and "ought" to rest on a soberly semantic thesis about reference-determination. It should be emphasized, though, that Eklund's suggestion is simply that—a suggestion—and that he goes to the trouble of raising some pressing worries about its viability. These are semantic worries, and so they do not trouble my reply to Enoch and McPherson.

Now, I'd have thought that something like my story here—on which we rely on ordinary first-order ethical theory to move from grasping a concept to discerning its correct application—would be the natural one for a quietist to tell. But Enoch and McPherson don't seem to so much as consider anything in the neighborhood. Rather, they both seem to take it as *obvious* that there's a conflict between the reasons and counter-reasons/schmeasons standards.

Why, though? Enoch offers no support for the view that we have counter-reason to cause ourselves pain other than that users of the "counter-reasons" concept *think so* (2011: 125). McPherson says even less; he simply *asserts* that the "schmeasons" standard is disutilitarian (2011: 233). One wants to borrow G. E. Moore's entreaty: "My dear sirs, what we want to know from you as ethical teachers, is not how people use a word . . . what we want to know is simply what is good" (1903: §11)—or in this case, what we have "schmeason" to do.

That's curious, though, because these are not philosophers known for leaving important points unsupported. I think there's something deeper going on here. Enoch and McPherson seem to be imputing to the quietist a view on which it's constitutive of "reason," "schmeason," "counter-reason," or the discourses to which they belong, that certain rules regarding their application are correct—and perhaps also the view that facts about the correctness of these rules supervene on facts about community use of these concepts. On this way of looking at things, I can't simply settle on the extension of "reason" or "schmeason" by doing first-order normative ethics, informed by the constitutive psychological links with things like motivation, as I did above; certain constraints are put in

place by the constitutive inferential rules that link these normative concepts with non-normative ones.

I can think of two main rationales for imputing a view like this to quietists. One is the sense that this is what quietists *must* say if we are to explain how these concepts apply. We know that the quietist sees no need for extra-ethical metaphysics; she does not rely upon moral properties to serve as truth-makers for normative or evaluative claims, or referents for evaluative or normative concepts. But then what makes a “reasons” or “schmeasons” claim true, or an application of one of these concepts correct? The thought may be that if it’s not the world, it’s got to be something in mind or language—definition, use, inferential role, rational commitment, the constitutive rules of a language-game; that sort of thing. “Schmeason”-discourse is governed by different constitutive rules than is “reason”-discourse, or so the story goes.

Of course, I don’t think that the quietist needs to say, or should say, any such thing to explain the application of ethical concepts like “reason” or “schmeason”.

I also suspect quietism’s critics may be saddling it with the commitment to such concept- or discourse-constitutive rules of inference because of what they have gleaned from Scanlon, and perhaps others, too. For Scanlon takes as fundamental the idea of domains of discourse, individuated by the concepts they involve. There are, he tells us, “standards for answering questions within” each domain—standards which “consist . . . of substantive principles,” which, in turn, “are justified by less explicitly codified reasoning about the subject matter in question” (Scanlon 2014: 20).

Now, there are two ways to interpret this. On the first interpretation, his view is simply that there are standards for what counts as a good way of answering a question about reasons, and that these standards need not be grounded in any domain that doesn’t concern reasons. All quietists will agree with this. On the second interpretation, Scanlon’s view is the aforementioned one: it’s partly constitutive of the idea of a “reason,” or of the idea of the domain of reasons, that certain inferences to/from “reason”-thoughts from/to some non-evaluative thoughts are rational or truth-preserving. In other words, not all of the questions in this domain are “open”; some are “closed” by these constitutive rules. Not all quietists will agree with this, to say the very least. I certainly don’t.

Purposefully or not, Scanlon offers some grist for the mill of the second interpretation, writing that “this reasoning is *internal* to the domains in question. It proceeds by appeal to our best general *understanding of the nature of the concepts basic to the domain* and to the most obvious particular truths within it.” And he tells us, in a way that is supposed to allay concern, but I think stokes it, that “the truth values of statements within a domain are properly settled . . . not just [by] the particular substantive principles about the subject matter of a domain *that we accept at a given time*” (Scanlon 2014: 20). A critic can be forgiven

for wondering: “‘Internal,’ as in constitutive?”, or “You say that understanding the concepts plays a role in our reasoning — so you mean, above and beyond the role of just allowing us to grasp what we’re talking about?” “‘Not *just*’ — so wait a minute, does that mean that what *we* think *now* has *some* relevance, at least?”

For what it’s worth, Scanlon is not the only quietist whose way of pitching things encourages this kind of thinking about our meta-ethical view. Richard Rorty recommends what he calls “ethnocentrism” about ethics, on which we attach a “special privilege” to our own norms and standards. He embraces “the view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society — ours — uses in one or another area of inquiry” (Rorty 1991: 23). Elsewhere, he writes: “The interesting question is not whether a claim can be ‘rationally defended’ but whether it can be made to cohere with a sufficient number of *our* (emphasis in original) beliefs and desires” (Rorty 1990: 640). I don’t know if Rorty meant to suggest anything more than that: (a) we cannot fully step outside of our own perspectives; and that (b) we should free ourselves from the urge to try and do so. But as it stands, he seems to be lending support to a bad interpretation of quietism, as a view on which the way we do things around here — how we carve up domains and employ concepts — is not merely a limit to live with, but indeed plays a more robust normative-explanatory role.

3. The Second Possibility: “Reasons” Is Thinner than “Schmeasons” Is

Rather than insisting that “schmeasons” is completely thin, though, so that we can determine its extension by doing normative ethics, without appealing to anything like a constitutive inferential link with non-evaluative concepts, let’s see what happens if we take “schmeasons” to be thick (read: *not completely thin*). That makes much better sense, after all, of Enoch’s insistence on looking at the concept’s *actual use*, and of McPherson’s apparent stipulation that the schmeasons standard is disutilitarian. There are two sub-possibilities here. One is that “schmeasons” is thicker than “reasons.” Another is that, they are both equally thin, but that neither is completely thin. I find the second sub-possibility far more likely as an interpretation of what McPherson and Enoch are getting at, but it will ease exposition to start with the first. I do not see how we can consider our understanding of these issues complete until we have addressed this possibility.

I will argue that, if indeed the “reason” concept has fewer constitutive psychological features “built into it” than the “schmeason” one does, then the former standard should take precedence, because it is, to use McPherson’s terminology,

more “authoritative” than the latter is. When I say that one standard is more authoritative than the other, I mean that it is practically rational to do what one thinks is recommended by the former rather than what one thinks is recommended by the latter in the event of an apparent conflict between the two.

Let me begin by sketching an account of normative authority, which I defend at greater length in other work (Sepielli 2018a).

Start by noticing a basic fact about authority—that the standard of what we all-things-considered (“ATC”) ought to do, and that of what we have all-things-considered practical reason to do, seem to be particularly authoritative. So do standards that imply these, either conceptually or metaphysically—like, arguably, the standard of morality. We think that it makes sense to wonder: “Doing A would count as the best basketball play, or the best pedagogy, or the wittiest insult, but is it what I *ought* to be doing?”, and do A unless the answer is “no.” By contrast, if I come to see that something is indeed what I ought to do, it’d be odd to think that the fact that it’s *not also* the best basketball play or the wittiest insult would hold me back from doing the action—except, of course, if that causes me to reconsider what I ought to do.

I don’t think that it’s a coincidence that the “all-things-considered” standards enjoy this especially authoritative status. Rather, the fact that they *consider all things* is, I contend, what makes them authoritative.

A standard like that of the ATC ought or that of ATC practical reasons seems to “consider all things” because it’s apparently not constitutive of such a concept that one who employs it in preferred conditions rules out certain “things” as relevant to its application.⁶ And we can add that such a standard “merely” considers all things: it’s not part of the concept that one who employs it rules *in* certain considerations as relevant. Of course I think some things are relevant and other things irrelevant to what we have reason to do. But I do not think this simply because doing so is part of what it is to be using “reason” in the first place.

By contrast, less-authoritative concepts like “best basketball play” and “wittiest insult” *do* rule in some things as relevant to their proper application, and rule out other things. It’s “contained,” if you will, in the concept of the best basketball play that one must judge that conduciveness to victory in basketball games is relevant to how to apply it; it’s arguably also contained in it that anything one must judge that anything that *isn’t* appropriately related to victory in basketball games is *irrelevant*. *Mutatis mutandis* for “wittiest insult.” It’s part of the very concept of wit that anyone who employs it must consider humor and cleverness,

6. I say “seems to” and “apparently” because I do think that there’s another standard—that of which action would be good, or fortunate, to occur, that considers even *more* things than the standard of the so-called “all-things-considered” ought does. I develop my general account of authority in defense of this odd claim, which is then a premise in an argument for consequentialism. But this is neither here nor there for the purposes of this paper, and so I’ll put it aside from now on.

and anything that is not appropriately related to these things irrelevant. We would think that someone did not understand what “wittiest” meant who said, clearheadedly: “What Hamid said to Hans was so nurturing and empathetic; that’s why I think he was the wittiest contributor to the conversation.”

I have three quick arguments for this theory of normative authority. First, I think it gets the cases right. It rightly classifies “ought” and “reason” as very authoritative. It rightly classifies “best basketball play” as less authoritative than these. It seems to classify, again rightly, “distributively just” as less authoritative than simply “just.” And so on. Furthermore, it does so in a way that’s explanatory—unlike, say, a view that cashed out authority simply in terms of being reason- or “ought”-implying (which wouldn’t *explain* the authority that the all-things-considered “ought” enjoys over other standards).⁷

Second, I think that it helps to explain why it’s *irrational* to guide one’s conduct by the less-authoritative standard in the event of an apparent conflict with a more-authoritative standard. Less-authoritative standards get their rational-motivational purchase in contexts in which I’m taking for granted as ends those things that are ruled in as relevant by the concepts of these standards. For example, a belief about what would be the wittiest remark motivates a rational agent in a context in which she’s taking for granted the ends of displaying cleverness and making others laugh. Elsewhere, I suggest that the function of such a concept is to reconcile and subsume these multifarious ends so as to produce a decision to act. One thing that happens when I token a *more* authoritative concept like “ought” is that I dissolve this context. More precisely, in asking, “But is this really what I ought to be doing?”, I call into question the ends that I had taken for granted, and also introduce the possibility of new ends. In this new, more wide-open context, less-authoritative standards lack the power to motivate rational agents.

Thirdly, I think my theory helps to explain how acting on the less-authoritative standard is bad in another way: it’s fetishistic. The ideal way to respond to the world depends just on the world itself—on whom your actions may affect, including yourself, your intentions, your emotions perhaps. When we follow less-authoritative standards, though, our actions and other responses depend not only on all of these things, but also on the constitutive inferential roles of the concepts of these standards. In acting on the standard of the “best basketball play,” for instance, I’m guided not just by the world, but by the particular restrictions on use that are built into the standard I’m using. By contrast, when I act on the standard of what I ought to do, I’m guided by the world itself, unfiltered by concept-constitutive standards that specify which aspects of that world I need to

7. Cf. Parfit (2011: 144–145).

rule in or out. One might call evaluation in terms of “ought” or reasons “pure,” and evaluation in terms of the best basketball play or wittiest insult “impure.”

It follows from this account that if “reason” considers all things in the aforementioned sense, and “schmeason” does not, then the reasons standard is more authoritative than the schmeasons standard is. Rationality demands that we hew to the former rather than the latter in the event of an apparent conflict. The former stands to the latter much as it stands to concepts like “best basketball play.” And there is no threat to ethical objectivity from the fact that I often ought to do something other than the best basketball play.

One might wonder whether this “authority” response is really one that a quietist can trot out. For earlier I suggested that metaphysics, semantics, etc. generally provide no grounds for accepting or rejecting ethical claims—even though, of course, I will of necessity use a concept in accordance with whatever constitutive psychological roles it has. But here, I seem to be adverting to such roles in a rather different way in arguing for an ethical conclusion. So what gives?

Recall what I said in the introduction. I did not say that metaphysics, semantics, and the rest are *always* irrelevant to which fundamental ethical claims to accept, just that they are *generally* irrelevant. This generality is explained by a background principle that forms the heart of quietism: only considerations that matter by the lights of the correct account of first-order ethics may bear on which fundamental ethical claims to accept, and metaphysics, semantics, etc. generally do not matter by said “lights.” But here I’m claiming an exception to the general rule, as I contend that the correct first-order ethical view *about which ethical standards are the most authoritative* assigns significance to facts about ethical concepts’ constitutive roles. The constitutive roles of “best basketball play”, say, determine when someone is using that concept *at all*, then, but, I want to say, they also determine when someone is using the concept of “authoritative” *correctly* (e.g., in declaring the standard of the all-things-considered ought to be more so than that of the best basketball play).

On what grounds do I say that these facts matter by the lights of first-order ethical theory, rather than bearing on which ethical beliefs to accept in the ways that the quietist would want to deny? This is a thorny issue,⁸ but the basic idea is that something—say, a semantic fact—matters by the lights of first-order ethical theory when it bears directly on whether something is good, or right, or *authoritative*, but not when it bears on these *only indirectly*, by bearing primarily on whether a belief, or sentence, or proposition regarding what’s good, or right, or authoritative, is *true* or *false*. There are various ways of operationalizing this contrast, which I detail elsewhere, but just for the moment, we may focus on one way involving *domain-generality*. When we say, for instance, that “good” refers to

8. I discuss it in much greater length in Sepielli (2020a: Ch. 4).

pleasure rather than to melancholy, and so it's *true* that pleasure is good, *and so pleasure is good*, our treatment of these semantic facts (about reference and truth) as relevant is just an instance of following domain-general semantic rules about the connection between reference, generally; truth, generally; and the world, generally. When we say, however, that the standard of the best basketball play is not very authoritative because of some fact about the very concept "the best basketball play," we are invoking no such domain-general semantic rule. (For example, we would not say—it would not even *make sense* to say—that the "African elephant" standard is not authoritative because the concept "African elephant" is too thick!)

Now, you might think: "This is a funny place to draw the line, isn't it? You're saying you can be a quietist if you let metaphysics and semantics influence your ethics in some ways, but not in others?" But actually, yes, I think this is a perfectly sensible thing to say. The quietist would not want to rule out, in advance, some ethical theory on which metaphysical and semantic facts really matter, somehow. If the quietist regards it—as she should—as an *open* question whether the number of atoms in the Hindenburg is of fundamental ethical significance, then she should not regard it as a *closed* question whether the constitutive role of a concept is in some ways significant. What she objects to is a style of reasoning on which one is urged to accept an ethical conclusion on grounds that are, by hypothesis, ethically irrelevant.

One might also object that I've simply pushed the bump under the rug: "You've said that either 'schmeason' is perfectly thin, in which case it has the same extension as 'reason,' or else it is thick, in which case it rules in and rules out more than 'reason' does, and is thereby less authoritative. But imagine a concept 'schmauthoritative.' One might wonder whether to act on those standards that are most authoritative or on those that are most schmauthoritative. It seems that unless you can settle this question in favor of acting on the former, there'll remain a problem for the objectivity of ethics on the quietist view."

My reply will be the one you'd expect: Either "schmauthoritative" has as thin a constitutive structure as "authoritative," or else it is thicker than "authoritative," with a constitutive inferential role as well that delimits its proper application. If it's the former, then the correct theory of authority, which of course I think is mine, must also be the correct theory of schmauthority. They can't disagree. If it's the latter, then "authoritative" is privileged over "schmauthoritative," for the sorts of reasons I laid out just above. Of course I'd give the same sort of response if someone then raised the possibility of an alternative concept "schmivileged"—for example, "Maybe authority is privileged, but what if schmauthority is schmivileged?" In each case, the alternative concept either necessarily has the same extension as the ordinary one, or else the ordinary one is privileged over the alternative one.

Of course, if we step outside all of these facts about authority and privileging and meta-privileging, and ask: “Okay, well is there anything *non-ethical* that makes it all true?”, my answer would have to be “no.” But I don’t regard this as especially troubling. For one thing, this is a commitment that the quietist has generally—that there is no way to vindicate ethics from the outside, however rich and interwoven the explanations and vindications *within* ethics are. For I’m not claiming that my explanation is “external” or “neutral” in the sense of being extra-ethical. Rather, it’s external in the sense that it privileges “reasons” over “schmeasons”—assuming, again, that the former is thinner—without simply saying, for example, “We have *more reason* to act in accordance with the *reasons* standard.”

And secondly, while some might be dissatisfied with my explanation, I don’t think that non-quietist realists like Enoch or McPherson have offered us any better way of dealing with this regress issue. Enoch’s line is that schmeasons don’t exist. Well, let’s suppose that for argument’s sake that he can make good on that claim. That helps with the “schmeasons” problem. But of course that is not the only place where one would need to privilege some normative standards over others. Enoch would still need an account of authority to explain why the reasons standard should take precedence over the standard of, say, the good football play. For no one can deny that there is such a thing as a good football play. If he wants to avoid accepting an account of authority like the one I offer in this section, then it would seem that he must look to something like McPherson’s strategy, on which an evaluative standard is less authoritative when it picks out a *property* that isn’t robustly normative or “elite.”⁹

Of course it’s possible to raise worries about this kind of strategy—namely, that we have no reason to believe counter-normativity will be less metaphysically elite than ordinary normativity, that metaphysical eliteness does not suggest normative privilegedness (Eklund 2017: 30–32), that it’s not, in general, clear how we could gain knowledge of eliteness (Warren 2016). I want to put all of these concerns aside, though. The important point is that McPherson’s metaphysically-inflected account of authority, no less than mine, prompts questions about whether to go with the authoritative standard or the “schmauthoritative” one, about whether to go with whichever of authority or schmauthority is more privileged or whichever is more schmivileged, and so on. And his theory, no less than mine, will have to be re-deployed over and over again to get the desired results. For if authority is no more robustly normative than schmauthority, then where does it get us to say that reasons are more authoritative than schmeasons, if one can say that the latter are more schmauthoritative? I don’t

9. See also Dunaway and McPherson (2016).

think this is a serious problem for him. But I neither do I think there's a serious problem for me.

4. The Third Possibility: "Reason" and "Schmeason" Are Equally Thin, but Neither Is Completely Thin

If this possibility obtains, then I cannot successfully argue, as I did in the previous section, that the reasons standard is more authoritative than the schmeasons standard is. For that argument required "reason" to be thinner than "schmeason." Nor can I argue, as I did in the first section, that "reason" and "schmeason" are necessarily co-extensive. My argument for that conclusion required both concepts to be completely thin.

It is completely open, then, for Enoch or McPherson or whoever to say: "Look, it's just constitutive of '*reason*' that one who employs it clearheadedly must do so in certain ways. And it's constitutive of '*schmeason*' that one can't but employ it in other ways. If you insist on saying '*reason*' and '*schmeason*' are necessarily coextensive, then, then I'll simply deny that you're talking about both of the concepts that I'm talking about."

What should the quietist say in response?

Let's start by recalling our assumption that there is no ethical concept thinner than "reason." (Again, we assumed this purely for the sake of terminological consistency with Enoch and McPherson, and nothing important turns on it.) That assumption, conjoined with the assumption we're making in this section, entails that there *are* no completely thin ethical concepts—that is, that *every* ethical concept has some constitutive link with non-evaluative concepts.

The quietist should insist that this is implausible. For it is tantamount to saying that it is not even possible for me to "define up", even by stipulation, a concept without constitutive inferential connections to non-evaluative concepts.

I want to maintain, on the contrary, that there is a concept corresponding to every conceivable combination of constitutive roles, both inferential and non-inferential. Not every such concept has been tokened mentally, of course, let alone given expression in language. So whether or not any term in natural language serves to express a completely thin ethical concept, it is perfectly within our power to stipulate one, for a combination of inferential and non-inferential roles that suffices for complete thinness is surely conceivable. I draw some inspiration here from David Lewis's "Principle of Recombination," which states that "patching together parts of different possible worlds yields another possible world" and that "anything can coexist with anything else" or "fail to coexist with anything else" (1986: 87–88). What I'm relying here might be called a Principle of Recombination of Conceptual Roles.

This is not to deny that the concepts associated with some such combinations are deeply objectionable in some way or other. Some, like Arthur Prior's "tonk," may arguably serve as what Prior calls (1960) "runabout inference tickets," allowing us to draw inferences that seem obviously unlicensed. Others, like "married bachelor," for instance, may arguably encode a contradiction. If a concept like that of the "special," all-things-considered "ought" is indeed as "empty" and devoid of cognitive significance as critics like G. E. M. Anscombe (1958) have claimed, then one might argue as Anscombe does that its sense, its inferential role, is not sufficient to explain its application.

But a concept like "reason," or "ought" as I defined it up above, does not work like "tonk," nor can it credibly be accused of encoding a contradiction. As to the charge that it lacks the robust sense that would be required to ground its application: That is certainly a fair point, and one that many philosophers, including but hardly limited to Anscombe, have worried about (see, e.g., Eklund 2017: Chs. 2–3). But as I've tried to make clear, the idea that a concept like "ought" or "reason" can have conditions of correct application only if we can explain these conditions by way of a theory of sense and reference or some other theory in the philosophy of language, is something that the true quietist will want to reject. It is an incursion of semantics into first-order normative ethics, and as such offends against the autonomy of the latter. Maybe quietists are *mistaken* in their stance here, but once again, that is another concern for another time.

Given the implausibility of the view that there are no completely thin ethical concepts, it should be no problem for the quietist to rely on the existence of such concepts in dealing with the "counter-normativity" problem. After all, the quietist who wants to defend true ethical objectivity should take the stance that such a defense is possible only given certain other plausible background hypotheses—not "come what may."

And indeed, this is the stance that non-quietist realists must take as well, or so it seems to me. McPherson, for instance, wants to break the symmetry between "reasons" and "schmeasons" *metaphysically*—by saying that the former but not the latter concept picks out a property that is robustly normative or elite. In this, he is taking a page out of the work of metaphysicians like Lewis and Ted Sider, who want to lean on the privileged-ness, naturalness, or eliteness of certain properties to do work in explaining everything from reference to rational inductive inference.

But of course this strategy can't vindicate real ethical objectivity in the face of the "counter-normativity" challenge, either, unless either the property of being a reason or that of being a schmeason is indeed more elite than the other. If there's no metaphysical eliteness in the world at all, no normative "joints in nature" of the type that McPherson is positing, then he can't "get us" objectivity. Same if reasons and schmeasons are *equally* elite. (It's worth observing: If there

is elitence, but it's "schmeasons" rather than "reasons" that picks out the more elite property, then McPherson's strategy technically can get us objectivity. But then it would seem to fail in other ways—specifically, by underwriting a view on which objective morality counsels "disutilitarian" (pain-maximizing, pleasure-minimizing) actions.

Everyone who wants to secure moral objectivity in the face of the "counter-normativity" challenge must rely on *something*, in other words, and for the reasons I've sketched here, the existence of completely thin concepts—perhaps heretofore unpublicized, perhaps "empty" by some philosophers' lights—doesn't seem like especially weak support, to say the least.

5. Conclusion

Enoch and McPherson are right in saying that ethical objectivity requires not only that there are mind-independent application conditions for concepts like "reasons," but also that, if those conditions can diverge from the application conditions of alternative concepts like "schmeasons," we have some way of privileging reasons over schmeasons that is independent of either the reasons standard or the schmeasons one. But they contend that there is no such way available to the objectivist quietist. I've argued that it's overwhelmingly plausible that both "reasons" and "schmeasons" (or some other similarly-related concepts) are completely thin, and that if they are, then the quietist can explain why they cannot conflict in their extensions. In the alternative, if "schmeasons" is thicker than "reasons," then the reasons standard is more authoritative than the schmeasons standard is.

Acknowledgments

Thanks very much to Jared Riggs, Daniel Wodak, Tristram McPherson, and David Enoch for helpful discussions about these issues. The two exemplary anonymous referees for this manuscript helped me to better understand and express a view in which I am very much invested, and for that I am immensely grateful.

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