Metaethics and the Limits of Philosophy

Kevin DeLapp

Abstract
This paper is an investigation of the forces and commitments which drive disagreement between different metaethical affiliations; an investigation we might characterize as *meta-metaethics*. Various prominent theorists are sorted into one or another of three meta-metaethical camps. This sorting reveals that many instances of metaethical dispute involve theorists talking past one another, and that many theorists who might share a metaethical affiliation actually have more in common methodologically with their opponents than with their compatriots. The diversity of meta-metaethical conceptions is juxtaposed with the ongoing debate concerning *Archimedean points* in moral theory, and is also shown to be a new version of the general *problem of the criterion*. Resources from both those debates are then requisitioned to argue for a particular way of adjudicating between competing metaethical theories.

Keywords: Metaethics; Metaphilosophy; Archimedean Point; Problem of the Criterion

1. Is There a Single, True Metaethic?
Moral disagreement is fundamental to the field of metaethics. Confronted with seemingly intractable first-order moral differences, we may be prompted to move to a higher level of abstraction and start wondering what we mean by moral terms and whether any of the disagreeing parties could be right or wrong. This way of thinking about the relationship between moral disagreement and metaethical theorizing is also sometimes associated with a certain (false, in my view) historiographical belief that in the pre-modern world there was not yet any metaethics because cultural diversity had not yet challenged moral hegemonies.[1] In this mode of thinking, metaethics is construed as a coping mechanism at best, or at worst, the final metastasis of modernist disillusionment. Moral disagreement has played another fundamental role in metaethics as an important explanandum. Not only is disagreement part of

---

[1] Consider, for example, MacIntyre's (1981) genealogy of an allegedly stable and self-contained moral tradition in the ancient Greek and Medieval Christian epochs, which fragmented under the weight of the Enlightenment impulses to analyze and universalize.

what creates the need for metaethics, but disagreement is also part of the raw data for which a metaethical theory needs to account. Often this accounting takes the form of claiming that, by focusing on explaining first-order moral disagreement, one or another metaethical theory thereby takes morality more "seriously" than its rivals; or that in doing so, it deals better with "real-world moral concerns" and is more responsive to "actual moral experiences" or "everyday moral intuitions." Metaethicists from all different theoretic persuasions talk this way, and it is tempting to suspect that the metaethical position which one finds most "intuitive" depends on one's antecedent theoretical framework. Realists argue that realism best explains moral disagreement because there must be some fact of the matter in order to explain what people are disagreeing *about*. Relativists argue that relativism best explains moral disagreement because, if there were some objective fact of the matter, surely we would have found it by now and ceased disagreeing. Expressivists argue that expressivism best explains moral disagreement because moral disputes so often provoke strong emotional responses.

The focus of this essay is the great irony that, although moral disagreement is so fundamental to metaethics, little attention has been given to the disagreements between *metaethicists themselves*. As Roderick Firth once noted, the acceleration of metaethical theorizing in the early twentieth century "has not produced any general agreement […and] it seems likely, on the contrary, that the wealth of proposed solutions, each making some claim to plausibility, has resulted in greater disagreement than ever before, and in some cases disagreement about issues so fundamental that certain schools of thought now find it unrewarding, if not impossible, to communicate with one another."[2] Relativists, realists, and expressivists all leverage first-order moral disagreement as evidence for their respective theories. By extension, since there is likewise plenty of persistent disagreement amongst second-order metaethics, does this suggest some *third-order* tier we might characterize as *meta-metaethics*?[3]

This paper is an investigation of the forces and commitments which drive disagreement between different metaethical affiliations. After first distinguishing meta-metaethics from so-called meta-metaphysics in Section Two, I turn in Section Three to identifying competing meta-metaethical conceptions—that is, different basic ways of envisioning the job of metaethics—and I attempt to sort various prominent theorists into one or another camp. I then situate such meta-metaethical sorting in relation to the

---

[2] Firth (1952: 317).

[3] Joyce & Kirchin (2009) briefly toy with this term, and I cursorily reflect on it in a previous work (DeLapp 2013: 6-8).

question of *Archimedean points* in moral theory and also to the general *problem of the criterion*, discussed in Sections Four and Five respectively. The meta-metaethical sorting and the juxtapositions with these two other debates reveal that many instances of metaethical dispute involve theorists talking past one another, and that many theorists who might share a metaethical affiliation actually have more in common methodologically with their opponents than with their compatriots. The upshot of this analysis, explored in Section Six, is what I shall describe as a *hypoethical* way of viewing metaethical disagreement.

2. The Disanalogy with Meta-Metaphysics
Before examining different meta-metaethical possibilities, we should first try to get clearer on the nature and scope of this topic. When we talk about *meta-metaethics*, it might be thought that we are engaged in the moral analog of what has recently become known as *meta-metaphysics*. David Manely describes meta-metaphysics as "concerned with the foundations of meta-physics," involving inquiries such as "Do the questions of metaphysics really have answers?"[4]

While the literature on meta-metaphysics can help shed some light on what meta-metaethics is all about, there are several important ways in which the latter is distinct from the former. For example, Manely notes that exposure to metaphysics can give rise to two sorts of responses: intuitions that the conclusions of metaphysics are either *deflationary* (there is really nothing at stake in a debate) or *trivial* (something is true, but in an obvious and uninformative way). Metaethical theorizing, though, does not give rise to these responses in the same way. To be sure, there are aspects of metaethical theorizing that *can* be deflating and trivial.[5] But one disanalogy between metaphysics and metaethics is that the explananda of metaphysics (viz., facts about facts) are not conceived as being intrinsically normative or action-guiding in the same way that the explananda of metaethics are (viz., facts about values).

First-order morality is to metaethics as reality is to metaphysics. For, morality is normative in a way that bare-bones reality is not, or at least need not be. If someone convinces you of a fact about something, or demonstrates

---

[4] Chalmers, Manely & Wasserman (2009).

[5] Examples of *deflationary* metaethical conclusions might be arguments against motivational internalism that appeal primarily to psychopathy or to sharp distinctions between beliefs and desires: if such psychological phenomena are empirically untenable, then the arguments would constitute empty distinctions. Examples of *trivial* metaethical intuitions might include Moore's "good is good" or the realist's insistence that "Hitler was *really* bad."

a persuasive mathematical proof to you, that might give you reason to believe it, but not necessarily to care about it. By contrast, if someone asserts that a practice in which you are engaged is morally wrong, or that a choice you made was unethical, that impacts you in a much more personal way. Since morality is more normatively impactful in this way, it follows that metaethics is likewise more impactful than metaphysics. And being impactful in this way will militate against intuitions that treat metaethical conclusions as deflationary or trivial.

Another way in which meta-metaethics differs from meta-metaphysics is that the former is, as it were, *meta-er* than the latter. Meta-metaphysics, at least as it is conceived by Manely, is much closer to regular metaphysics than meta-metaethics is to metaethics. Take some feature of reality, e.g., a hand clenched into a fist.[6] Metaphysics is the attempt to characterize the nature of this feature: is the fist a new object that has come into existence, or is it merely a different shape of the preexisting object called "the hand"? *Meta*-metaphysics, by extension, is the reflection on what we are doing when we attempt to characterize the nature of the fist and whether such attempts are misguided or not. Thus, positivism, mereology, ontology, and the like are all meta-metaphysical positions or methods. Obviously these positions involve very different ways of looking at metaphysics: positivists will deny that pure metaphysics is ever possible or informative, Quineans will see metaphysics as in the business of clarifying science, etc. But none of these meta-meta-physical positions deals with the question of how to adjudicate between divergent theories. In the case of ethics, things are a bit different. To see how, take some feature of morality, e.g., a willful murder. Normative theory is the attempt to characterize the nature of this feature: in virtue of what is the murder wrong? Metaethics is the reflection on what we are doing when we attempt to characterize the moral nature of the murder. So, metaethics is doing to morality what meta-metaphysics is doing to reality; which means that meta-metaethics is doing some additional third thing altogether.

Manely himself doesn't admit this disanalogy. He claims that the first meta in *metaphysics* "follows the meaning" of the prefix in *metaethics*.[7] So he would see meta-metaphysics as methodologically analogous to what we are calling meta-metaethics. But the study of ethics and the study of reality don't start on equal footing. Since the former supervenes upon the latter[8],

---

[6] Manely (2009: 2) borrows this example from Hirsch (2002: 67).
[7] Manely (2009: 1, n.1).
[8] I don't mean here to be begging any substantive metaethical questions. Except perhaps for the most extreme metaethical Platonists, all metaethicists (even the most "robust" realists)

questions about ethics automatically have an added layer of complexity compared to questions about reality. Metaphysics is the business of analyzing, categorizing, and explaining the features of reality; but in the case of morality, that job would fall to normative theory, not metaethics. The meta-metaphysical question of what we do or should mean by "object" or "existing" is methodologically equivalent to the metaethical question of what we do or should mean by "value" or "reason". Metaphysics does not have any methodological equivalent to meta-metaethics, except perhaps meta-philosophy itself.

3. Meta-Morphoses

As the above section made clear, we cannot seek clarity about meta-meta-ethics by looking to an analogy with meta-metaphysics. So let us try a different approach. Metaethical theories are sometimes sorted in terms of which views of truth or epistemic justification they utilize, with correspond-entist, coherentist, and expressivist accounts being the most prevalent. I propose to organize meta-metaethical approaches according to analogs of the same positions.

First, we can define *meta-correspondentism* as the view that there are metaethical facts (i.e., facts about theories about values) to which acceptable metaethical theories must correspond. According to this position, the goal of a metaethical theory is to accommodate accurately lower-order moral phenomenology and value commitments that are external or antecedent to the metaethical theory itself. Metaethicists who appeal to pre-theoretical moral intuitions, "folk morality," or "ordinary moral discourse" are meta-corre-spondentists in this respect. Other metaethicists envision their job to be defending a metaethical theory from its rivals and showing that it jibes with other theoretic commitments such as scientific naturalism, theism, or whatever. Insofar as metaethics is framed in terms of being consistent or inconsistent with other positions, we can think of this methodology as a kind of *meta-coherentism*, where the goal is overall coherence relative to the commitments in question. Still other theorists see the goal of metaethics to be simply the analytic clarification of our concepts, language, and practices. As with minimalists about truth, this tribe of metaethicists cares little for whatever deeper metaphysical, epistemological, or (first-order) moral commitments a theory might have or lack. For such *meta-analyticists*, as we can call them, a metaethical theory is a good one so long as it is asserted comprehensively, clearly, and precisely.

---

countenance moral properties bearing *some* kind of connection to or grounding in the rest of reality.

It is tempting to think that these meta-metaethical orientations naturally align with particular metaethical affiliations, e.g., with realists also being meta-correspondentists, etc. Although this does happen, it is neither necessary nor dominant. Consider, for instance, some of the various ways that theorists have mixed and matched metaethical and meta-metaethical stances:

To start with the classics, G.E. Moore defended a non-naturalist realism grounded in the so-called Open Question Argument, which states that, for any putative reduction of moral to non-moral terms (e.g., reducing Good to Utility), we can always "significantly ask" whether that non-moral thing is itself good.[9] Moore thought this "openness" demonstrates that the would-be reduction cannot be true because it would not be analytic; because if it were analytic, then questioning it would be as nonsensical as questioning whether a bachelor was unmarried. Metaethicists will debate the pros and cons of this reasoning, but meta-metaethically we can also investigate the criterion of linguistic or conceptual "significance" upon which Moore relies. Because Moore is committed to acceptable definitions being analytic and asserted in a way that is immune to counterexample, we can view him, according to the meta-metaethical taxonomy introduced above, as a meta-analyticist. He is not a regular expressivist, of course, because he thinks moral language is truth-apt and he does not think that truth is simply warranted assertibility. At the metaethical level, he is a (non-naturalist) realist. But at the meta-metaethical level—that is, the level of methodology—he is an analyticist because he takes himself to be aiming at clarifying our thinking and speaking.

The distinction between the levels of metaethics and meta-metaethics helps us appreciate the many structural or methodological similarities between thinkers who are otherwise diametrically opposed. To use another canonical example, A.J. Ayer was an expressivist (emotivist) who was metaethically opposed to Moore's realism. But they share in common a view of the overall purpose of metaethics; namely, to deal with analyticity, language, and clarity of expression. Ayer, after all, *agrees* that the Open Question Argument is valid. He simply finds the conclusion so far-fetched, that he treats it as a *reductio* of cognitivism.[10]

By contrast, consider a contemporary non-naturalist realist such as Russ Shafer-Landau.[11] Despite arriving at essentially the same position as Moore (viz., that moral terms are *sui generis* and irreducible), Shafer-Landau is more concerned with making his metaethics consistent with what he takes to

---

[9] Moore (1902).
[10] Ayer (1952).
[11] Shafer-Landau (2003).

be the truths of science and psychology, something about which Moore was not especially worried. Much of Shafer-Landau's argumentation is devoted to rebutting disanalogies between morality and science, and showing that moral realism can cohere with other metaphysical and epistemological commitments. Meta-metaethically, this makes him a meta-coherentist, even though he rejects regular coherentism and relativism.

As another example of how one's metaethics can be orthogonal to one's meta-metaethics, consider Ayer's emotivism in relation to the quasi-realism of Simon Blackburn.[12] Blackburn considers himself to be roughly in the same non-cognitivist lineage of Ayer. Both are expressivists at the metaethical level, in that both construe moral utterances to be essentially outpourings of emotive endorsement. But Ayer arrives at his non-cognitivism by *first* focusing on analyzing language, whereas that is precisely where Blackburn *concludes*. For Ayer, non-naturalism is false because it conflicts with how he thinks we use language; namely, expressively. For Blackburn, language is expressivist because non-naturalism is independently false (because it's unscientific). This is similar to the old *modus tollens*/*modus ponens* switcheroo, with Ayer reasoning something like this:

    1. If cognitivism were true, then non-naturalism would be true.
    2. Non-naturalism cannot be true.
    3. So therefore cognitivism is not true.

And Blackburn reasoning something like this:

    1. If naturalism is true, then non-cognitivism is true.
    2. Naturalism is true.
    3. So therefore non-cognitivism is true too.

So, to put this in terms of the meta-metaethical sorting we have introduced: while Ayer is an expressivist who is a meta-analyticist, Blackburn is an expressivist who is a meta-coherentist.

As another example, consider the debate between Gilbert Harman and Nicholas Sturgeon concerning the question of whether realist moral properties play any role in ethical observations. Harman presents us with the infamous scenario of an onlooker stumbling upon some wicked children torturing a cat.[13] For Harman, it is much more parsimonious to explain the onlooker's judgment that the children are wicked by appealing to the onlooker's moral upbringing. If moral psychology is sufficient to explain why we regard things as right or wrong, why bring in the unnecessary baggage of weird objective moral properties? Sturgeon disagrees: belief in objective moral properties can add something to our ethical judgments and

---

[12] Blackburn (1993).
[13] Harman (1977a).

observations that mere personal psychology cannot; it can help explain why we think that torturing animals is objectively wrong in the first place.[14] What is striking here is that Harman and Sturgeon are both cognitivists and they are both naturalists. The difference between them stems at root from a difference in what they each think counts as the proper explananda of a metaethical theory. Harman finds relativism attractive because it is capable of explaining *that* we find the cat-torturing wicked (because we were raised to think so). Sturgeon finds realism attractive because it is capable of explaining *why* we find the cat-torturing wicked (because we think it is objectively wrong). Thus, the Harman-Sturgeon debate is just as much, or centrally, a *meta*-metaethical debate than it is a metaethical one. Harman is trying to show that realism is inconsistent with empirical science, making him a relativist as well as a meta-coherentist; while Sturgeon is trying to show that realism best corresponds to our pre-theoretical moral beliefs, making him a realist as well as a meta-correspondentist.

Here are some well-known realists who are also meta-coherentists: Robert Adams, who argues that realism best coheres with theism[15]; Thomas Nagel, who argues that realism best coheres with his view of trans-moral teleology and non-naturalism[16]; David Brink, who argues that realism best coheres with psychology[17]; and Paul Bloomfield, who is attracted to realism in virtue of its coherence with biology.[18] Relativists are just as likely to appeal to meta-coherentist considerations: David Wong argues that relativism best accommodates naturalism in biology and psychology[19]; and John Mackie's famous Argument from Queerness consists of an appeal to the *in*coherence of realism with naturalism in epistemology and metaphysics.[20]

One of the things these examples show is that metaethicists err when we consider the arguments for or against a metaethical position without also

---

[14] Sturgeon (1985).

[15] Adams (1979).

[16] Nagel (2012).

[17] Brink (1989).

[18] Bloomfield (2004).

[19] Wong (2006).

[20] Mackie (1977). Mackie's separate Argument from Relativity is another argument in favor of relativism, but this argument instead comes out of a meta-correspondentist commitment to accommodating what Mackie sees as the independent and antecedent facts of moral diversity. This is a reminder that the same theorist may have more than one meta-metaethical orientation, depending on the particular argument they are deploying. Thus, Harman, whom I've characterized above as a meta-coherentist vis-à-vis his disagreement with Sturgeon, at other points makes use of meta-correspondentist considerations when he defends relativism on the grounds that it best jibes with pre-theoretical intuitions he has always harbored (cf., Harman 1977b).

taking into consideration the underlying meta-metaethics or methodologies for that position. If a realist, for example, focuses on developing an arsenal of objections against non-cognitivism *tout court*, she will overlook the important fact that not all non-cognitivists arrive at their theories via the same methods or take for granted the same explananda. If a realist is a meta-coherentist, her arguments might conceivably convince a relativist who shares her meta-coherentism; but she will most likely be talking past other relativists who instead start from meta-correspondentist or meta-analyticist premises.

4. Archimedean Points

Before we attempt to adjudicate the many metas of metaethics exposed in the previous section, something needs to be said about a related debate that has especially vexed theorists in recent years; namely, the question of whether moral theory has, can have, or needs an *Archimedean point* that steps outside of the moral life it is attempting to theorize, i.e., a way of separating metaethics as an explanans from first-order morality as its explanandum. Speaking for the pro-archimedeans, Paul Bloomfield, for instance, remarks that, "Archimedean neutrality is required of metaethics, at the very least, because it is the metaethicists who are charged with determining the ground rules of engaged morality or the rules of the moral game. Anything less than neutrality at the metaethical level may very well have question-begging and unfair consequences at the engaged level."[21]

Ronald Dworkin, on the contrary, has prominently argued that meta-ethicists cannot avail themselves of any such objective leverage.[22] In

---

[21] Bloomfield (2009: 302). See also MacPherson's claim that metaethical theorizing can be cleanly differentiated from normative theorizing in virtue of the fact that "it is possible to agree about the correct normative theory while disagreeing about the correct metaethical theory" (2008: 16).

[22] Dworkin (1996). Although much of this current debate in metaethics footnotes to Dworkin, it has clear antecedents in Rawls and, even prior to that, in Prichard (1912: 29) who argued that "we do not come to appreciate an obligation by an *argument, i.e.* by a process of non-moral thinking." Analogous anti-archimedean impulses are notable throughout the history of moral philosophy—from Aristotle's commitment to ethical theory "saving its phenomena" to William James's idea that ethical skepticism is simply not a "live option" for ethical theorists (e.g., James 1891: 184-185). Yet another example can be found in Bernard Williams's (1985) arguments about the distortion that theory can cause to "thick" moral concepts and experiences; something that he believed constituted "the limit" of moral philosophy, whence the title of the present essay. And of course, the idea that theory is inseparable from practice and that interpretation has "no outside text" is by now an orthodoxy of poststructuralist and deconstructivist methods. The question of whether moral theory can ever have anything novel or corrective to say to first-order moral practice and experience was also of major concern to classical Chinese philosophers. The Confucian thinker Mengzi famously advanced a version of anti-archimedeanism with his thesis

---

particular, he argues that metaethical varieties of skepticism or subjectivism must begin by either taking first-order moral terms and experiences seriously as explananda, which he thinks would dialectically limit the extent to which they can ever be fully (*inter alia*) eliminated, reduced, deflated, relativized, or fictionalized; or else such skeptics/subjectivists must begin by *not* taking first-order morality seriously, which he thinks would thereby be question-begging. However, this does not mean that Dworkin is therefore a metaethical realist, at least not in a theoretically robust sense. For, as he sees it, realists are pushed to theorize their realism only or largely in opposition to theoretic pressure from skeptics/subjectivists. By deflating skepticism/subjectivism, Dworkin thinks he has taken away the *raison d'être* of realism. Rather than defending realism, what Dworkin really seeks is the recovery of a sort of pre-theoretic innocence, or an *anti-theory* of metaethics.[23]

How does this debate about Archimedean points relate to our foregoing discussions of meta-metaethics? Despite Dworkin's anti-archimedeanism being an anti-theory of metaethics, it is *not* theoretically neutral or quietist at the *meta*-metaethical level. Anti-archimedeans critique the idea that meta-ethical theorizing can step outside its moral explananda, but in leveling this critique, they simply invert the order of explanatory priority*;* for now, first-order moral phenomena become the tribunal against which metaethical theorizing is judged. We have gone from an Archimedean relationship of theory-to-practice to, as it were, a *Copernican* inversion of practice-to-theory. By viewing metaethical theories as themselves substantive ethical claims, and thereby ceding justificatory authority to pre-theoretical moral phenomenology, anti-archimedeans can be shown to be committed to what we have earlier called meta-correspondentism.[24]

It is also worth bearing in mind that Dworkin's own anti-theory attitude toward metaethics is not essential to his meta-metaethical correspondentism. One can be an anti-archimedean *meta*-metaethical correspondentist while still also holding a substantive metaethical stance. Matthew Kramer, for example, defends a non-naturalist, anti-reductionist moral realism. But, like Dworkin, Kramer's methodology involves looking to our pre-theoretical moral phenomenology as a constraint on acceptable metaethical theorizing: realism is the correct metaethical position, he claims, not because it is necessarily the most analytically expressed (as Moore thought), nor because it can be made

---

that one should look for moral justification for a given course of action only in one's "heart", regardless of whether or not such justification can be derived from one's "doctrines" (see *Mengzi* 2A2 and 3A5).

[23] Kalderon (2013) nicely brings out the anti-theory dimensions in Dworkin.

[24] For a critique of Dworkin's arguments against archimedeanism, see Ehrenberg (2008).

to cohere with the rest of our scientific worldview (as Shafer-Landau is concerned to show), but because it best corresponds to and justifies other normative commitments. Kramer argues, for instance, that realist views which conceive of morality as supervening in certain necessary ways on natural states of affairs "are themselves expressive of substantive moral propositions."[25] Thus, for Kramer, the reason to endorse moral realism is itself a moral reason. This means that Kramer, in addition to being a regular moral realist, is also an anti-archimedean and a meta-correspondentist: he thinks we adjudicate between metaethical alternatives by seeing how they correspond to antecedent and independent moral intuitions and practices.[26]

5. Another Problem of the Criterion

Having thus situated the archimedeanism debate as a variant of our larger meta-metaethical exploration, let us restate the initial problem that was exposed in Section Three. First-order moral disagreement provokes second-order metaethical theorizing. Since metaethical theories can also disagree with one another, however, we need third-order meta-metaethical adjudication. But given the diversity of these methodologies, which orientation—i.e., which meta-version of correspondentism, coherentism, or analyticism—is the right one? How can we answer this question without merely stipulating an orientation, which would be question-begging, or pushing the issue of methodological justification back to a *fourth* order (meta-meta-metaethics…), *ad nauseam*? It would thus appear that we find ourselves facing a metaethical variant of "the problem of the criterion."

As popularized by Roderick Chisholm, the problem of the criterion pertains to the apparent circularity of attempts to epistemically justify truth claims. The worry is that, for a proposition P to be justifiably regarded as true as opposed to false, some standard must be brought to bear to differentiate its truth from falsity. The apparent problem arises when we ask whether this standard for truth is itself true, thereby initiating either a circularity (i.e., the standard is regarded as true because it accommodates our belief that P is true, but our belief that P is true is in turn only justified by the standard) or a regress (i.e., we appeal to a standard to justify our standard, etc.). The problem of the criterion has generated a substantial literature in epistemology

---

[25] Kramer (2009: 11).

[26] Similarly, Enoch (2011) defends moral realism on the grounds that it alone "takes morality seriously," by which he means that it makes the best sense of an alleged indispensability of moral values for explaining our antecedent beliefs and practices; thereby revealing Enoch's commitment to *meta*-metaethical correspondentism and to the anti-archimedean value-laden-ness of metaethical theory. Clipsham (2013) also argues that anti-archimedeanism supports moral realism.

but has only rarely been applied to moral philosophy[27] and never (so far as I know) to metaethical theorizing. To set the stage for the meta-metaethical replies to the problem of the criterion offered in Section Six below, it will be helpful to briefly unpack how Chisholm sees the issue and what some of the prominent epistemological responses to it have been.

Chisholm states the basic problem this way: "If we could fix on a good method for distinguishing good and bad methods, we might be all set. But this, of course, just moves the problem to a different level. How are we to distinguish between a good method for choosing good methods? If we continue in this way, of course, we are led to an infinite regress and we will never have the answer to our original question."[28] Chisholm proceeds to identify three possible responses to this problem, which he organizes according to how each response envisions the relationship between particular truth claims and general criteria for truth. *Particularists* are those who methodologically start from particular truth claims and hold them up as explananda for a general criterion. There is an inductive or doxastic spirit to particularism: particular true beliefs are the brute phenomena that an acceptable criterion of truth must save. By contrast, *methodists* approach the problem in a more deductivist spirit. They start with a criterion for truth already in mind and then use it to derive particular truth claims that satisfy that criterion.

Chisholm observes, however, that both particularism and methodism are question-begging. For *how* do the particularists know which beliefs are the true ones in the absence of a criterion? And to what could the methodists appeal to make their selection of a criterion not arbitrary or self-serving? This dilemma sets up a third possible response to the problem, which is *skepticism*, the view that there is no principled way to adjudicate between particularism and methodism. Skepticism claims that a criterion for truth cannot be found without assuming some particular truths (à la particularism) *and also* that particular truths can't be justifiably held without assuming some criterion for their truth (à la methodism). But, Chisholm points out, that very skeptical claim itself is an assumption: by skepticism's own lights, wouldn't it too need its own criterion for its own presumed truth? In other words, it is question-begging to suppose that there is no non-question-begging solution to the problem of the criterion.

Chisholm concludes that any possible "solution" to the problem of the criterion will inevitably be question-begging (including in the *meta*-question-begging way that skepticism is). Despite this, he argues that we should

---

[27] See DePaul (1988).
[28] Chisholm (1973: 592-593).

pledge to particularism nevertheless. Although we cannot be deductively certain that the particular truth claims from which we start theorizing are indeed true (since by definition, particularists lack an initial criterion or guarantee of their truth), we face the pragmatic fact that particularism is simply the only option that allows us to continue with our epistemological projects. An unstable foundation of pre-criterion truth claims is at least preferable to having no foundation whatsoever (skepticism) or a foundation upon which we can never build anything further (methodism).

If we return to the metaethical version of the general problem of the criterion, we can see that the current debate regarding Archimedean points has clear parallels to the possible solutions to the problem that Chisholm presents. Anti-archimedeans such as Dworkin and Kramer are like meta-ethical versions of Chisholm's particularists: they start from the presumed facts of our moral phenomenology and make those the desiderata for an acceptable metaethical theory. Pro-archimedeans, such as Bloomfield, correspond to Chisholm's methodists: they seek a metaethical criterion that is neutral on and independent of our first-order moral phenomenology. Just like the Methodists generally, the archimedeans will have a difficult time avoiding being question-begging; and just like the particularists generally, the anti-archimedeans will have a difficult time avoiding an infinite regress. The final section below explores what it might look like if we applied something like Chisholm's own solution to the problem of the criterion to this apparent meta-metaethical stalemate.

6. From Metaethics to Hypoethics

Chisholm's breakdown of the problem of the criterion helps us resituate and clarify the archimedeanism debate in metaethics and also, as I will argue, helps suggest a way forward. Notice first how the archimedeanism and problem of the criterion debates map onto one another.[29] Archimedean neutrality is analogous to the aspirations of Chisholm's methodists. Both archimedeans and methodists aspire to an explanatory vantage point in-

---

[29] What Chisholm called skepticism does not seem to have an explicit analog in the archimedeanism debate, although it has apparent resonances with Dworkin's general quietism and anti-theory perspective on metaethics. Chisholmian skepticism might be similar to what Simon Kirchin (2012: 183) has described as *metaethical pluralism*, the view that different metaethical theories and methodologies might work for different issues or contexts, without any need to generalize or settle upon a single universal position. Kirchin rightly criticizes this approach as leaving us unable to give any principled, non-arbitrary reasons for adopting one metaethical theory for one issue and another theory for another issue. Such *ad hoc* pluralism would render our metaethical views schizophrenic and merely descriptive of the pre-theoretical moral intuitions we already held.

dependent of their explananda. And so, like methodism, archimedeanism threatens a regress, with any putative archimedean point requiring an additional point to justify the first point *ad nauseum*. Anti-archimedeanism in metaethics is akin to how Chisholm characterized particularism. For anti-archimedeans, metaethics is accountable to first-order moral phenomenology, just as for particularists, the criterion of truth is accountable to first-order truth claims. And so, like particularism, anti-archimedeanism begs the question of which items of moral phenomenology are the ones worth accommodating. For surely the anti-archimedean does not think that a single metaethic can hope to or ought to accommodate *everyone's* moral pheno-menology. We will want some method for weeding out naïve, corrupted, or unethical moral intuitions and perspectives, which plunges anti-archimedean-ism (just like particularism) back onto the wheel of the problem of the criterion. Moreover, it is far from clear that there is any universal or stable "folk metaethics" to which the anti-archimedean could appeal.[30] The "experimental metaethics" studies that have purported to uncover such a folk metaethics face serious limitations. It is hard to see how choices about how to operationalize "morality" in their survey tools, or about which examples should be presented as conventional as opposed to moral, could not be metaethically question-begging. Very often, such studies are also radically underpowered in terms of their sample sizes, and it is frequently underdetermined whether participant responses are evincing stable metaethical commitments rather than politeness, hesitancy, or uncertainty in the face of typically outlandish hypotheticals. The folk, if they exist, enjoy no special exemption from the metaethical problem of the criterion.

How to break this apparent stalemate between archimedeanism/method-ism and anti-archimedeanism/particularism? I suggest that metaethicists seek inspiration in Chisholm's own proposed way out of the problem of the criterion. Recall Chisholm's proposal: to pledge allegiance to particularism, despite acknowledging that it is question-begging, on the grounds that it at least is the only solution to the problem that allows the epistemological enterprise to advance. That is, we might not be able to justify particularism absolutely or definitively, and we might not ever be able to convert a dedicated methodist or skeptic; but particularism is nevertheless a transcend-ental prerequisite for continued epistemological theorizing. Chisholm's idea is that, when it comes to doing epistemology, if we're going to start at all, we have to start *somewhere*. In this way, Chisholm's transcendentally-motivated particularism is distinct from the regular particularism he criticizes as being

---

[30] Cf., Nichols (2004); Knobe (2011).

question-begging. We can concede to a skeptic that our selection of particular truth claims cannot be independently or absolutely justified; but faced with the alternatives of either skeptical abdication of epistemology altogether or the infinite regress of methodism, it is not irrational to grant some presumptive weight to what we pre-reflectively take to be true. Thus, for Chisholm, we can approximate the best aspects of both particularism and methodism by putting them into a sort of reflective equilibrium: particularism furnishes us with some explananda that boast a degree of epistemic preferability, and we then leverage this preferability to construct something like the criterion that methodism seeks. The method will morph to accommodate the particulars, and certain of the particulars may need to be adjusted in compliance with the method. In this way, we may think of Chisholm's proposed solution to the problem of the criterion as a *methodized particularism.*

Applied to the metaethical version of the problem of the criterion, Chisholm's methodized particularism reveals a new way forward in the archimedeanism/anti-archimedeanism debate. In Chisholmian spirit, we can say that first-order moral experiences and convictions, while not indefeasible, nevertheless must be said to have at least some presumption in their favor. The "must" here is a transcendental one: metaethicists must grant some presumption to their moral explananda in order to preserve the very intelligibility of the metaethical enterprise. Just as Chisholm proposed that we should bring methodism and particularism together into a sort of reflective equilibrium, metaethicists might similarly bring together aspects of both archimedeanism (which is the form that methodism takes in the metaethical version of the problem of the criterion) and anti-archimedeanism (which is the form that particularism takes in the metaethical version of the problem of the criterion). The anti-archimedean impulse provides the moral explananda whose presumptive weight and transcendental necessity softens the charge of being question-begging. And these moral explananda provide an anchor to the engaged level of morality for any would-be archimedean criterion. Being thus tethered to the moral explananda that are its *raison d'êtres*, an archimedean criterion is insulated from the regress to further meta-criteria. This Chisholm-inspired integration of archimedeanism and anti-archimedeanism amounts to a flattening of morality—with moral phenomenology, normative theory, and metaethical theorizing and debate all playing mutually-influencing roles in moral life.

To appreciate this alternative, consider a related view that finds expression in the work of Carla Bagnoli. Bagnoli looks specifically at the relationship between normative theory and moral practice, with specific

attention to the phenomenology of moral dilemmas. In that context, she claims that "theorizing in ethics is in itself a moral activity, continuous with our moral practices, and meant to further our understanding of the experience and aspirations we have."[31] She advises that we adopt a "reflective stance" as a middle-ground between the extremes of those who would seek to make theory subservient to moral phenomenology and those who instead want to interpret and revise moral phenomenology in light of the conclusions of theory. The reflective stance asks whether a theory, "offers an intelligible picture of ourselves and posits challenges that it is worthwhile for us to undertake."[32] This hybrid approach appeals to moral phenomenology not as a decisive criterion against which theories are made or broken (as unadulterated particularism or anti-archimedeanism would), but as a "requirement of intelligibility. Appeal to the agent's experience is therefore used not as a basis to counter ethical theory, but to set its agenda."[33]

I am very sympathetic to Bagnoli's view of the relationship between moral practice and normative theory, but as it stands, it won't quite work for the higher-order relationship between normative theory and metaethics, let alone the relationship between metaethical theory and meta-metaethical orientation which we are presently considering. Of the two relata Bagnoli considers (moral practice and normative theory), one of them (moral practice) has an attendant phenomenology. Bagnoli writes, "The agent's experience constitutes a reason for reviewing or rejecting an ethical theory, a falsifying factor, when the representation that the theory allows for the experience of the agent is not intelligible to the agent herself, and there is no independent ground for considering the agent morally incompetent."[34] However, if we move up one level of meta this phenomenology quickly starts to evaporate. Moral agents may have a moral phenomenology, but normative theorists qua theorists do not. At best, theorists might have a theoretic phenomenology, i.e., the experience of theorizing or viewing something from a certain theoretical perspective. But I am not aware of any qualia associated uniquely with being a normative theorist. That is, I very much doubt that there is any what-it-is-like-to-be-ness just for theorists. If the normative theorist has only a derivative moral phenomenology, any moral phenomenology the metaethicist will be able to avail herself of will be even more derivative. By the time we get to meta-metaethics, we will have arrived at a pretty thin

---

[31] Bagnoli (2007: 186).
[32] Bagnoli (2007: 186).
[33] Bagnoli (2007: 186).
[34] Bagnoli (2007: 208).

conception of moral experience—certainly too feeble to ground the sort of reflective stance Bagnoli envisions.

Nevertheless, there is a Bagnoli-inspired move the meta-metaethicist can make in response to the problem of the criterion. Part of Bagnoli's claim involves the recognition that there is a degree of interplay between normative theorizing and moral experience—that moral theorizing is itself a type of moral practice. And, it seems to me, this aspect of theory *does* persist when we move through higher and higher metas. Normative theory can influence moral practice when an agent comes to see her own actions and intentions in terms of that theory. In a similar way, metaethical theorizing can influence normative theorizing when a theorist comes to see her theorizing meta-meta-ethically. Just as normative theory is constrained by the criterion of making us intelligible to ourselves and others, so too is metaethical and meta-metaethical theorizing. What we think about our moral theories (metaethics) and also what we think we're doing when we think about our moral theories (meta-metaethics), all help shape subsequent attitudes and experiences, which then in turn become fodder for other theories, at all the normative, meta, and meta-meta levels. Bagnoli writes that, "There is a continuity between living morally and theorizing about it,"[35] and so why not claim that there is also a continuity between theorizing about morality and theorizing about our moral theories?

To spare ourselves from introducing yet more cumbersome *meta* terminology, let us refer to this idea as *hypoethics*. Hypoethics is the view that the correct metaethical position is the one which makes intelligible our interest in metaethics itself as well as all the strata of moral philosophizing that occurs at "lower" (*hypo*) levels, out of the recognition that they are all mutually influencing dimensions of the same moral life. This echoes the kind of methodized particularism which Chisholm proposed as a solution to the general problem of the criterion. Such a hypoethical stance involves evaluating metaethical theories in light of the interrelationships they have with the rest of the full moral landscape, from normative theories to first-order moral practices and experiences. This is not merely a more meta version of what we earlier called meta-correspondentism; for according to that view, moral experience is an autonomous domain that serves to check and balance metaethical theorizing. A hypoethical stance can prevent the infinite regress of archimedeanism, because hypothetics tethers metaethical criteria to their first-order moral explananda, and can also prevent the circularity of other forms of anti-archimedeanism; because hypoethics grants,

---

[35] Bagnoli (2007: 208).

à la Chisholm, a presumptive weight and transcendental necessity to particular moral explananda.

To summarize, this essay has explored the meta-metaethical possibilities for making sense of the apparent disagreement between metaethicists. Meta-metaethical commitments and methods were identified in canonical meta-ethical authors, and these were unpacked by reference to the debate about Archimedean points in moral theory and the general problem of the criterion in epistemology. Inspired by Bagnoli's work on moral phenomenology and by Chisholm's own response to the problem of the criterion, a "hypoethical" standard was introduced that attempts to integrate many of the meta-metaethical considerations into a single, albeit messy, moral theory-practice hybrid. Such a hypoethics, like Chisholm's methodized particularism, constitutes a kind of modified anti-archimedeanism. At a minimum, it is hoped that such discussions help suggest ways of moving forward in the archimedeanism debate and illuminate some of the ways in which metaethicists of different theoretic persuasions might have more in common with one another than is otherwise acknowledged.[36]

Bibliography

Adams, Robert (1979). "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1): 66–79.

Ayer, A.J. (1952). *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Dover.

Bagnoli, Carla (2007). "Phenomenology of the Aftermath: Ethical Theory and the Intelligibility of Moral Experience," in *Moral Psychology*, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum. Rodopi (2007): 185–212.

Blackburn, Simon (1993). *Essays in Quasi-Realism*. Oxford.

Bloomfield, Paul (2004). *Moral Reality*. Oxford.

Bloomfield, Paul (2009). "Archimedeanism and Why Metaethics Matters," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 4: 283–302.

Brink, David (1989). *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge.

Chalmers, David, David Manely & Ryan Wasserman, eds. (2009). *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford.

Chisholm, Roderick (1973). *The Problem of the Criterion*. Marquette. Reprinted in *The Foundations of Knowing*. Minnesota (1982): 590–601.

Clipsham, Patrick (2013). "In Defense of Anti-Archimedean Moral Realism," *Metaphilosophy* 44 (4): 470–484.

DeLapp, Kevin (2013). *Moral Realism*. Bloomsbury.

DePaul, Michael (1988). "The Problem of the Criterion and Coherence Methods in Ethics," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1): 67–86.

Dworkin, Ronald (1996). "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (2): 87–139.

Ehrenberg, Kenneth (2008). "Archimedean Metaethics Defended," *Metaphilosophy* 39 (4/5): 508–529.

Enoch, David (2011). *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. Oxford.

Firth, Roderick (1952). "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (3): 317–345.

Harman, Gilbert (1977a). *The Nature of Morality*. Oxford.

Harman, Gilbert (1977b). "Is There a Single True Morality?" Reprinted in *Explaining Values*. Oxford (2000): 77–99.

Hirsch, Eli (2002). "Quantifier Variance and Realism," *Philosophical Issues* 12: 51–73.

James, William (1891). "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Reprinted Dover (1956): 184–215.

Joyce, Richard & Simon Kirchin, eds. (2009). *A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*. Springer.

Kalderon, Mark (2013). "Does Metaethics Rest on a Mistake?" *Analysis* 73 (1): 129–138.

Kirchin, Simon (2012). *Metaethics*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Knobe, Joshua (2011). "Folk Moral Relativism." *Mind and Language* 26 (4) 482–505.

Kramer, Matthew (2009). *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine*. Blackwell.

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1981). *After Virtue.* Notre Dame.

Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin.

MacPherson, Tristram (2008). "Metaethics and the Autonomy of Morality," *Philosopher's Imprint* 8 (6): 1–16.

Moore, G.E. (1902). *Principia Ethica*. Reprinted Prometheus (1988).

Nagel, Thomas (2012). *Mind and Cosmos*. Oxford.

Nichols, Shaun (2004). "After Objectivity: An Empirical Study of Moral Judgment," *Philosophical Psychology* 17 (1): 3–26.

Prichard, H.A. (1912). "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Mind* 21 (81): 21–37.

Shafer-Landau, Russ (2003). *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford.

Sturgeon, Nicholas (1985). "Moral Explanations," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Cornell (1988): 229–55.

Williams, Bernard (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Harvard.
Wong, David B. (2006). *Natural Moralities*. Oxford.

Kevin DeLapp
Converse University
kevin.delapp@converse.edu