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Metaethics and the conceptual ethics of normativity

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the value of distinguishing two projects concerning our normative and evaluative thought and talk, which we dub "metanormative inquiry" and "the conceptual ethics of normativity" respectively. The first half of the paper offers a substantive account of each project and of the relationship between them. Roughly, metanormative inquiry aims to *understand* actual normative and evaluative thought and talk, and what (if anything) it is distinctively about, while the conceptual ethics of normativity engages in *normative or evaluative* reflection on normative and evaluative thought and talk. We explore how certain theories of content determination complicate the distinction between these projects, but argue that both the distinction and its significance survive these complications. The second half of the paper argues that attention to the distinction between these projects can promote progress in both projects in three ways. First, it can transform our understanding and evaluation of views that are routinely classified as part of "metaethics". Second, it can help us to identify important theoretical options that otherwise tend to remain obscure. And, third, it can help us to avoid tempting but fallacious arguments which can easily arise if the projects are not distinguished.

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Introduction

Normative and evaluative thought and talk are famously *puzzling*, at least according to many attentive philosophers. They also *matter* in a way that arguably contrasts with many other philosophically puzzling things. Roughly, this is because of the practical role they have in helping to guide how we live, think, and feel. This paper argues for the value of distinguishing

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two different projects concerning normative and evaluative thought and talk, each of which can be motivated especially clearly by drawing on one of the two purported features of that thought and talk mentioned above.

The first half of the paper offers a substantive account of these two projects and the relationship between them. In §1 we introduce the first project, which naturally arises from puzzlement about normative and evaluative thought and talk. This project aims to *understand* actual normative and evaluative thought and talk, and what (if anything) it is distinctively about. It involves questions such as the following: what are the linguistic and psychological features of this kind of thought and talk? Does it imply commitment to certain entities (e.g. normative facts, properties, or relations)? Are such commitments vindicated? For reasons we will explain below, we will characterize this project as *metanormative inquiry*, of which we take *metaethic*s to be an important subset.

In §2 we introduce the second project, which naturally arises from the idea that normative and evaluative thought and talk matter in distinctive ways. This project engages in *normative* or *evaluative* reflection on normative and evaluative thought and talk. It involves questions such as the following: are the normative words and concepts we currently use *defective* in some way? Could they be *improved?* Which normative concepts *should* we be using, and why? We call this project the *conceptual ethics of normativity*. (For brevity, here and elsewhere in the paper, we often use the term 'normativity' broadly, to encompass (e.g.) the evaluative, the "narrowly normative" or deontic, and the aretaic.)[1]

Some may find the distinction we draw between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity to be intuitive. Others may think that it is impossible to cleanly separate these two projects. In §3, we first explain why we think that the distinction between the projects is real and deep. As we discuss, certain theories of content-determination might seem to threaten the distinction. We explain how these theories indeed complicate the distinction, but argue that both the distinction and its significance survive these complications.

One might think of the two projects as either *competitors* or as *complementary*. Some of the rhetoric associated with recent work in the conceptual ethics of normativity suggests thinking of that project as a *replacement* for what we call the metanormative project. In §4, we argue that both projects are well-motivated. We suggest further that

[1]In this paper, single quotation marks (e.g. 'cat') are used strictly to mention linguistic items. Double quotation marks (e.g. "cat") are used for a variety of tasks including quoting others' words, scare quotes, and mixes of use and mention. Terms in small caps (e.g. CAT) pick out concepts.

they are complementary in the sense that concerns or ideas arising within each project can help to motivate work in the other.

In theory, the distinction between these two projects might be of *merely* taxonomic interest. We argue that it is not. More specifically, we argue that explicit attention to a clear distinction between these projects can help to promote progress in both projects. The central reasons this is so, we argue, stem from the fact the two projects have very different *success conditions*. Drawing on this idea, we argue that attention to the distinction is fruitful in three ways. First, it can transform our understanding and evaluation of views that are routinely classified as part of "metaethics" (§5). Second, it can help us to identify important theoretical options that otherwise tend to remain obscure (§6). And, third, it can help us avoid tempting but fallacious arguments that can easily arise from misunderstanding the success conditions of a target view (§7).

It is a widespread thought in contemporary "metaethics" (as in many other parts of philosophy) that distinguishing between *linguistic* and *metaphysical* theses is crucial both to properly understanding the range of theoretical options we have, and for responsibly arguing for or against such options. If the arguments of this paper are correct, the same is true of distinguishing between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity. We hope that this paper contributes to progress in both of these projects, by encouraging broader recognition of the theoretical importance of this distinction.

1. Metanormative inquiry

As we emphasized in the introduction, this paper is motivated by the conviction that the distinction between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity is theoretically illuminating. This informs what we aim to do in offering accounts of these topics. We are not attempting to give a conceptual analysis of terms like 'metaethics,' 'metanormative inquiry', or 'the conceptual ethics of normativity'. Indeed, one of the central theses of this paper is that some work that is currently routinely classified as "metaethical" is best understood as fundamentally concerned with the conceptual ethics of normativity. We are instead seeking to identify and distinguish two sorts of projects, in a way that will help us better understand and engage in those projects.[2]

[2]In this way, as will become clearer in what follows, our work in this paper can be seen as engaging in conceptual ethics about a number of central terms that we use in distinguishing these projects, including the terms 'metaethics,' 'metanormative inquiry', and 'the conceptual ethics of normativity'.

This section introduces our account of the first of the two projects that frame this paper: *metanormative inquiry*. One way of introducing this account is to note that philosophers often classify as "metaethical" or "metanormative" a wide range of different kinds of claims, arguments, questions, and controversies: some about psychology, others about language, others about metaphysics or epistemology, etc. The raises a challenge: to explain what (if anything) unifies inquiry that explores such apparently diverse claims (and arguments, etc.).

On the view we favor, these claims (and arguments, etc.) are unified in virtue of contributing (whether consciously or not) to an overarching, collective project with a distinctive success condition. We call that overall project "metanormative inquiry", and characterize it as follows:

> Metanormative inquiry aims to explain how actual normative thought and talk – and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about – fits into reality.[3]

In what follows, we briefly unpack and expand on this account, and draw out some of its implications. We then distinguish some salient branches of metanormative inquiry, and discuss the relationship between metanormative and normative inquiries and claims.[4]

On our gloss, metanormative inquiry aims to explain certain descriptive facts: the facts about a part of actual thought and talk, and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about. This means that it is fundamentally a descriptive rather than normative project. For example, metanormative inquiry does not aim to evaluate our actual normative thought and talk, or to advocate for alternatives to it.

There are different ways to understand what "reality" amounts to. For our purposes here, we can take 'reality' to mean, roughly, the *totality of what there is*. Here, as elsewhere, our account of the metanormative project is intentionally schematic, leaving it entirely open *what* reality comprises. For example, it takes no stand on whether God exists, whether some form of physicalism is true of our actual world, or whether the real is identical to the fundamental. One reason that this is important is because we want to allow that there are *false* metanormative theories, and one way for them to be false is to falsely characterize relevant parts of reality.

[3]We develop this account of metanormative inquiry in (McPherson and Plunkett 2017), where our focus is ultimately on meta*ethics* in particular. See also (Plunkett and Shapiro 2017), which develops the same account, where the focus is ultimately on meta*legal* inquiry in particular.

[4]We discuss all of these aspects of our account in more detail in (McPherson and Plunkett 2017).

Normative thought and talk can appear to be distinctively *about* certain things. We use the term 'normative reality' to refer to the totality of those things. For example, some philosophers think that normative thought and talk is distinctively about normative facts or properties. On some views, there are such facts and properties, in which case understanding how they fit into the totality of what there is comprises part of metanormative inquiry. On other views, normative thought and talk is about such things only in the (intensional) sense that 'Pegasus' is about a winged horse, and on still other views, normative thought and talk is not about anything in even that thin sense. For brevity, we will sometimes obscure these possibilities below, by glossing metanormative inquiry as the project of explaining how *normative thought, talk, and reality* fit into reality.

Next consider our talk of "fitting in". The core idea here is that metanormative inquiry aims to explain how normative thought, talk, and reality *relates* to reality, including to specific salient aspects of it. For example: what kind of mental state is the thought that something is unethical? What contribution do normative words make to the meanings of sentences? What is the distinction between normative and non-normative sentences? Do some or all normative sentences purport to be *about* a distinctive class of properties? Are any such properties instantiated? If so, how do we come to know about them? Etc.

As we noted in the introduction, we use 'normative' broadly here, to encompass (e.g.) the evaluative, the deontic, and the aretaic. Given this broad use, it follows that there are many different normative words and concepts, and several seemingly natural ways of grouping these together. These groupings suggest natural branches of metanormative inquiry. For example, *general* metanormative inquiry concerns what is true of *all* of our normative thought and talk, from moral talk to thought about mafia norms. Often, however, metanormative inquiry is more narrowly focused on apparently unified subsets of normative thought, talk, and reality. So, for example, we understand metaethical inquiry as the branch of metanormative inquiry focused on ethical thought, talk, and reality. We can similarly distinguish "meta*moral* inquiry", "meta*epistemic* inquiry", "meta*legal* inquiry", etc. Moreover, given how we introduced our broad use of 'normative', another move is to group together thought, talk, and reality about the *evaluative* in particular, and then the *deontic* in particular, and the *aretaic* in particular.

A key branch of metanormative inquiry focuses on normative thought and talk that (at least people think) is about *authoritative* or *robust*

normativity.[5] To see what we have in mind here, consider the following. Suppose you think that prudence recommends you do something but that morality requires you not to do it. In light of this, you wonder: "what should I do?". It is very natural to think that – in many contexts – when you ask this question you aren't just interested in how this candidate action stands with respect to *some* further set of norms (e.g. the rules of a social club or the law). Instead, in many contexts, you want to know what you *really and truly* should do. This suggests a kind of normativity – what we will call *authoritative* or *robust* normativity – that answers this question. In turn, we can think of any number of contributory notions that are tied to this notion of normativity: e.g. reasons that count in favor of what you *authoritatively* should do (as opposed to counting in favor of what you "morally should do" or "legally should do") and values that help determine what you *authoritatively* should do (e.g. things that *really and truly* are valuable). Much of recent metanormative inquiry, we think, is well understood as (often implicitly) about authoritative normative thought, talk, and reality.[6]

Two final notes concerning the varieties of metanormative inquiry. First, one part of metanormative inquiry concerns the relationship between different sorts of normative thought, talk, and reality. For example, there are prominent debates concerning whether there are rich entailment relations between moral and authoritative thoughts or facts, or between legal and moral thoughts or facts. There are also long-standing debates about the relationship between evaluative thoughts or facts (e.g. facts concerning goodness, better or worse) and normative ones (e.g. facts about reasons and obligations). Second, any regimentation of metanormative inquiry comes with substantive and controversial assumptions. For example, some philosophers have argued that the very idea of authoritative normativity is confused or defective.[7] And others might question whether there is anything especially unified about (e.g.) "moral" thought, talk, and reality, casting doubt on whether "metamoral inquiry" is in fact an interestingly unified subfield.

As we have explained, we understand metanormative inquiry as a kind of *project* characterized by a distinctive success condition. This raises the question: what makes a *claim* (or, similarly, an *issue, theory, question,* etc.)

[5]For explicit characterization and defense of the sort of concept being used here in discussing "authoritative" or "robust" normativity, see (McPherson 2018).
[6]For example, we think that discussion of this kind of normative thought, talk, and reality is at the core of (Korsgaard 1996), (Enoch 2011), (Parfit 2011), (Street 2006), and (Gibbard 1990).
[7]See especially (Baker 2018), (Copp 1997), and (Tiffany 2007).

"metanormative"? To approach this question, start with the following observation: an individual claim can bear any number of different interesting relations to the overall project of metanormative inquiry. For example: a claim might be a crucial part of a given approach to metanormative inquiry, but irrelevant to others (e.g. the claim that the fundamental normative facts are mind-dependent might be crucial to certain forms of reductive metanormative naturalism, but play no role in certain forms of metanormative expressivism). Or, to take another example, a claim might bear on the prospects of a given argument that matters for metanormative inquiry (e.g. a thesis about conditionals might matter in assessing the Frege-Geach problem for expressivism). Finally, to take perhaps one of the more straightforward examples, a claim could be directly about which of a relevant range of rival approaches to metanormative inquiry is correct (e.g. whether metanormative expressivism is more plausible than metanormative naturalistic realism). We treat the question of whether a claim counts as "metanormative" as a context-sensitive feature, which depends in part upon *which relation* to the overall project of metanormative inquiry is salient in the given context.

Characterizing metanormative inquiry in terms of its success conditions allows us to helpfully distinguish it from other projects concerning normativity. For example, consider projects that aim to identify and explain what we ought to do. To aim to do this with maximal explanatory generality is to engage in *systematic normative theorizing*, while to aim to do this concerning some specific cluster of contexts (e.g. what one ought to do with respect to eating meat in the contemporary USA) is to engage in *applied normative theorizing*. (And similarly, mutatis mutandis, for normative concepts other than OUGHT).

These projects might *interact* with metanormative inquiry in any number of ways. For example, systematic normative theorizing might inform the project of metanormative inquiry, or vice versa. To illustrate, consider the idea that our best metanormative theorizing might decrease the plausibility of certain otherwise attractive normative theories, or vice versa.[8] Moreover, a given claim – e.g. the claim that normative reasons for action are attitude-dependent, or the claim that consequentialism is true – might matter for more than one of these projects. We think that is often the case.[9] The fact that there can be these kinds of connections between the projects, we think, is important: it allows us to vindicate the plausibility of the

[8]For discussion of the latter set of methodological ideas, see (Darwall 1998) and (McPherson 2012).
[9]To return to our previous point about the context-sensitivity of "claims" talk, it then might well be that these claims count *both* as "metaethical" and "normative ethical" in some contexts.

widespread thought that the claims made within metanormative inquiry and substantive normative inquiry can overlap, or that the projects can be intertwined in any number of other ways. Our project-focused accounts of metanormative and normative inquiry allow us to explain how there can be a theoretically important distinction between these two sorts of inquiry despite their methodologically informing each other and potentially including overlapping claims. This is because, despite these connections the two projects still have deeply contrasting success conditions.[10]

We have thus far proceeded at a high level of abstraction. In closing this section, we offer an example to illustrate the kind of work we see as part of the project of metanomative inquiry. Consider Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit's work on moral functionalism. At the heart of their view is an account of foundational moral semantics. Jackson and Pettit argue that the content of a moral term is given holistically, by the "network of content-relevant connections" that it bears to other vocabulary, where this network is identified by examining our semantic intentions.[11] These connections include "input" clauses such as paradigm instances of moral wrongness, "internal role" clauses that fix the relation between normative terms, and "output" clauses that indicate appropriate motivational responses to moral judgments.[12] Jackson and Pettit reasonably suggest that their holistic foundational moral semantics lends support to an intuitionistic methodology for normative ethics. On their view, the "paradigms" and "commonplaces" that they identify within the holistic network just mentioned are "candidates for *a priori* truth", because each will play a role in fixing the meanings of moral terms.[13] Finally, they suggest that the underlying metaphysics of this account is purely naturalistic, in (roughly) the sense that all of the properties, relations, and facts that moral thought and talk is about are ones that are metaphysically continuous with (indeed, on their view, identical to) ones studied by the natural and social sciences.

On our account, a wide range of work can play a role in helping us make progress within metanormative inquiry, from work on the

[10]This point allows us to respond to various forms of skepticism about the very possibility of metaethics, as well as to various kinds of criticism of the metaethics/ethics distinction (including, for example, the arguments in (Dworkin 2011) and (Berker 2018)).

[11](Jackson and Pettit 1995, 22).

[12](Jackson 1998, 130).

[13](Jackson and Pettit 1995, 23). Note that Jackson and Pettit allow for the idea that there can be tensions between the different "paradigms" and "commonplaces" within the relevant holistic network, in which case they will need to be resolved in order to fix the meanings of moral terms. An important question in such cases is what standards should be used for such resolution, and why. We return to this issue later on in this paper, where we discuss some of Pettit's more recent work.

semantics of counterfactuals to work on the nature of higher-order evidence. Part of what makes moral functionalism a particularly striking contribution to such inquiry is that it aims to be a relatively *comprehensive* and *unified* account of the core explananda of metamoral inquiry (a historically important branch of metanormative inquiry). That is: the account they offer gives us the outlines of a comprehensive picture of how actual moral thought, talk, and reality fit into reality.

2. The conceptual ethics of normativity

This section introduces our second central project, which we call the *conceptual ethics of normativity*. We can initially introduce this project by saying that it involves normative inquiry about normative thought and talk. For example, the question of whether we ought to use moral concepts (and why) is a question in the conceptual ethics of normativity. Especially given some natural readings of the terminology of 'conceptual ethics', we should flag that we understand the conceptual ethics of normativity expansively, in three ways.

First, the term 'conceptual' here should be understood broadly, to signal focus on a cluster of related topics concerning thought and talk. There isn't a theory-neutral way to identify precisely *which* topics those are.[14] For our purposes here, we will take conceptual ethics to include the assessment of concepts, words, and pairings between concepts and words.[15]

Second, the term 'ethics' is intended only to convey that the conceptual ethics of normativity is a branch of normative inquiry. It is *not* intended to suggest that conceptual ethicists can only engage in (e.g.) moral or political evaluation of concepts. Rather conceptual ethicists can and do assess thought and talk against any number of different norms or standards.[16] For example, one might evaluate whether the use of a word or concept promotes social justice.[17] Or one might also

[14]One's views on this contested question will depend, in part, on which sorts of entities one countenances in one's theory of thought and talk, and what work those things do in that theory. For example, some philosophers are skeptical that work in conceptual ethics (or connected work in conceptual engineering, which we will discuss below) really is about *concepts* as such. See (Cappelen 2018). For further discussion, see (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2020) and (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020).

[15]Our account of "conceptual ethics" here draws from (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a) and (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b). See the discussion in those papers for further discussion on what conceptual ethics involves, and on the choice of 'conceptual ethics' as piece of philosophical terminology for the issues at hand.

[16]For more detailed discussion of this issue, see (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a) and (Burgess and Plunkett 2013b).

[17]See e.g. (Haslanger 2000).

ask whether it "carves nature at its joints",[18] or is epistemically fruitful to use.[19]

Work in conceptual ethics happens throughout philosophy, ranging from work in the philosophy of race to fundamental metaphysics to epistemology.[20] The conceptual ethics of *normativity* is the subset of conceptual ethics which focuses specifically on issues about normative thought and talk. Again, (following our discussion in the previous section) we understand 'normative' here broadly, in two ways. First, it encompasses, (e.g.) deontic, evaluative, and aretaic thought and talk. Second, it encompasses subsets of the normative such as the *epistemic*, the *moral*, the *prudential*, the *legal*, etc.

We now illustrate a final way in which our characterization of the conceptual ethics of normativity is expansive: it concerns the assessment of both actual normative thought and talk, as well as possible alternatives to that thought and talk.

The first strand of the conceptual ethics of normativity focuses on normative words and concepts that are in use. It asks questions like: is this concept *defective* in some way? Is it *good to use*? etc. To illustrate, you might think that Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogy of morality involves a critical evaluation of the use of the modern concept MORALITY, and related concepts.[21]

A second strand of the conceptual ethics of normativity begins from the initially plausible thought that our actual normative concepts are not inescapable. There might be *alternative* concepts which we could use instead, giving rise to different kinds of normative thought and talk. This strand of the conceptual ethics of normativity investigates these alternatives, and their evaluation (saliently, relative to our actual concepts). For example, we can ask: are any of these alternative concepts *better* than our current concepts, and *should* we therefore be using them instead?

This last set of questions – questions about the reform or replacement of our current concepts – brings up an important issue: if we think we should in fact reform (or replace) our current concepts, how do we actually go about doing that? This issue suggests a connection between conceptual ethics and *conceptual engineering*. Roughly, as we see it,

[18]See e.g. (Sider 2011) for this kind of "metaphysical" standard for work in conceptual ethics.
[19]See e.g. (Pérez Carballo 2020).
[20]For further discussion, see (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a) and (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020).
[21]See (Nietzsche 1887/1994). For brief discussion of how Nietzsche's arguments here can be fruitfully be read as ones in conceptual ethics, see (Plunkett 2016).

conceptual engineering not only involves the sort of normative theorizing involved in conceptual ethics, but also other things as well. In particular, as we see it, paradigmatic projects in conceptual engineering draw on work in conceptual ethics to improve on the concepts (or other broadly "representational" devices) that we use, either by making new ones, or reforming the ones we have, and then trying to implement the use of those new (or reformed) concepts in practice.[22]

Our discussion so far has emphasized dimensions of *diversity* within the conceptual ethics of normativity. Despite this diversity we nonetheless take the conceptual ethics of normativity to be a unified project, in the following sense. Whichever normative words or concepts one examines, and whichever standards one uses, in doing the conceptual ethics of normativity, one is engaged in the assessment of normative words, concepts, or other "representational" devices.[23] The crucial point is that this underwrites a clear contrast with the project of metanormative inquiry, as we now explain.

3. The depth of the distinction between the two projects

In the previous two sections, we introduced metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity. This section begins by summarizing the apparently deep contrast between those projects suggested by our accounts. It then explains and addresses what we take to be the most important challenge to the depth of this contrast.

As we now explain, the accounts sketched in the previous two sections suggest two apparently clear contrasts between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity:

1) metanormative inquiry concerns *actual* normative thought and talk, while the conceptual ethics of normativity concerns both *actual* and *possible* normative thought and talk
2) metanormative inquiry is *descriptive*, while the conceptual ethics of normativity is *normative*

We now explain these two contrasts in slightly more detail.

[22]Our use of the term 'conceptual engineering' in this way draws broadly on the uses put forward by (Scharp 2013), (Eklund 2017), and (Cappelen 2018). Our gloss above is only a rough characterization of how we think of conceptual engineering, and its relation to conceptual ethics. For further discussion of this issue, see (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020) and (Burgess and Plunkett 2020). For a sample of the variety of ways in which different philosophers use the terminology of 'conceptual ethics' and 'conceptual engineering', see the papers collected in (Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett 2020).

[23]For defense of the idea that conceptual ethics is a unified branch of normative inquiry, see (Burgess and Plunkett 2013a).

First, we have emphasized that metanormative inquiry focuses on *actual* normative thought and talk. 'Actual' here should be read in an expansive sense that includes sentences not yet spoken and possible thoughts not yet cognized, but which still use the same words and concepts we do now. By contrast, the conceptual ethics of normativity also considers *alternatives* to our normative concepts, words, and other "representational" or "inferential" devices. As we noted, this part of the conceptual ethics of normativity can be motivated by the hope of *improving* or *ameliorating* our existing normative thought and talk. The two projects thus differ in their scope.

The second contrast is deeper. As we gloss it, the success condition for metanormative inquiry is to explain how actual normative thought, talk, and reality fit into reality more broadly. This need not (and usually does not) involve *evaluating* this thought and talk. By contrast, the core aim of the conceptual ethics of normativity is to answer normative questions about our normative thought and talk.

In order to illustrate this contrast, consider what we take to be an important contribution to the conceptual ethics of normativity: Peter Railton's form of naturalistic realism about ethical thought and talk. Railton's developed view shares some important features with Jackson and Pettit's view, discussed in §1. For example, both are broadly "naturalistic realist" views, and both appeal to certain functionalist ideas. However, one of the contrasts between Railton's view and Jackson and Pettit's view is crucial for our purposes. Jackson and Pettit aim to provide an illuminating account of our *actual* moral thought and talk. By contrast, Railton emphasizes that he is proposing "reforming" definitions of a range of ethical terms, including 'morality' and 'non-moral goodness'.[24] Railton claims that he takes his reforming definitions to be evaluable by specific criteria, including intelligibility, ability to play certain "evaluative roles", ability to preserve the right sort of "topic continuity" with our current thought and talk, and naturalistic epistemic tractability.

The crucial point is this. Jackson and Pettit's theory is *successful*, as a contribution to the metanormative project, if it helps explain our actual moral thought and talk in illuminating ways. By contrast, Railton's theory is successful, as a contribution to the conceptual ethics of normativity, if it is a compelling account of how we should engage in moral thought and talk. Railton's theory might well satisfy this condition even

[24]See (Railton 1986). See also connected work in (Railton 2003). For related ideas about "reforming" definitions of our moral (or other normative) terminology, see (Brandt 1979/1998). See also the final part of (Lewis 1989).

if his reforming proposals involve significant reform to our current moral thought and talk. For example, it might do so if it scores highly on the evaluative criteria he mentions (assuming they are on the right track), given that many of them are (at least largely) independent of correctly representing actual moral thought and talk.

These contrasts provide a clear prima facie case for the view that these projects are quite different: that the contrast between them is *deep*. After all, the above contrasts between these projects involve differences both in 1) *what* to investigate and 2) what sorts of considerations matter in the investigations, and why. If so, it could matter a great deal which of these projects one is engaged in.

It is possible to challenge the clarity and depth of this contrast, however. The clearest way to do so would be by arguing that the sort of normative considerations that are the focus of conceptual ethics in fact also play a role in determining the content of our actual thought and talk.

This might seem like a bizarre idea. However, versions of the idea that normative considerations play a role in content-determination have a long history in the theory of content. For example, on some prominent views of content, the principle of charity demands that (certain other things being equal) we assign mental contents to a given psychology in a holistic manner, to secure something like the overall *structural rationality* of that psychology, as much as possible.[25]

Recently, Robert Williams has proposed a theory of content-determination on which (to simplify brutally) we assign contents to the states of a psychology in a way that, as much as possible, secures the overall *substantive rationality* of that psychology.[26] And he argues that, on this view, if one uses a concept that plays roughly the role that our current moral concepts do, then that concept will ipso facto have the content of our moral concepts.

Williams offers a completely *domain-general* theory of content-determination. It is also possible to offer more local theories of content that have similar implications to his view. Consider three such examples. First, Ralph Wedgwood defends a version of "conceptual role semantics" for OUGHT that he claims entails that any concept with the same conceptual role as our concept OUGHT has the same content as that concept.[27] Second, Geoff Sayre-McCord proposes that *in the specific case of*

[25]See (Davidson 1973/2001) and (Lewis 1974).
[26](Williams 2018).
[27](Wedgwood 2007).

normative concepts (or at least those that are highly authoritative), the fact that it would be better if (e.g.) MORAL has a certain extension entails that MORAL in fact has that extension (and so on, mutatis mutandis for other normative concepts).[28] Third, Ronald Dworkin argues that normative concepts (including moral ones) are a species of *interpretive* concept. Dworkin claims that the content of such concepts is explained in part by normative facts about what best morally justifies our practices involving those concepts.[29]

Examples like these might seem to show that, given certain views about content-determination, the distinction we have been suggesting disappears. However, it does not, for reasons we now briefly explain.

On some of these views, normative considerations are only one ingredient in determining content. In this case, while certain questions in conceptual ethics become very relevant to the metanormative project, the two projects are still clearly distinct.

On other views (perhaps including versions of the ones from Williams and Dworkin), normative considerations might play such an important role in determining content that there would not be much of a gap in the results between certain properly conducted metanormative projects and certain properly conducted conceptual ethics projects. However, even if there were *no* such gap, at best this suggests that there could be a kind of convergence between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity, despite their differing aims and scope.

Further, each of the theories just mentioned (including those from Williams and Dworkin) propose that *specific* normative facts do surprising and central explanatory work in determining content. However, as we saw at the end of the preceding section, there is no agreement among conceptual ethicists concerning *which* (purported) norms, values, virtues, etc. to use in evaluating proposals in conceptual ethics. Thus, even on the theories of content-determination just mentioned, some work in the conceptual ethics of normativity will evaluate normative concepts using standards that do not play this content-determining role.[30] For example, imagine a Nietzsche-inspired critic of morality, confronted with the hypothesis that any concept that plays the role currently played by MORAL will have the same extension. She might conclude that

[28](Sayre-McCord Manuscript). See (Eklund 2017) for further discussion of this kind of hypothesis.
[29](Dworkin 2011).
[30]Moreover, even if certain specific normative standards played a role in both content-determination in conceptual ethics, there might well be a significant gap in *what* roles it plays in each, as well as *how explanatory important* each role is to the overall determination of the respective facts.

this just shows that we should attempt to avoid deploying *any* concept with that role. This argument for avoiding deploying a normative concept with a certain *role* is a paradigmatic instance of conceptual ethics.[31]

It is also worth emphasizing that to the extent that the metasemantic theories at issue mitigate the contrast between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity, they often do so by making metanormative inquiry appear *more* like the conceptual ethics of normativity. For example, Dworkin's theory suggests that *moral* evaluation of hypotheses about potential extensions for MORAL are crucial to metamoral inquiry. Thus, even if these theories complicate the distinction between the two projects, they simultaneously suggest strong reasons for metanormative theorists to be interested in the project of conceptual ethics.

We conclude that such theories of content-determination pose no threat to the substantiveness and depth of the distinction that we have proposed. However, they can have illuminating implications for how we classify specific projects. Consider one further example to illustrate this point.

On the "connectedness" account of content defended by Laura Schroeter and Francois Schroeter, the meaning of a term uttered by a speaker is determined, roughly, by a charitable holistic assignment of contents to the *entire linguistic tradition of which that speaker is a part*.[32] Now consider an important example of conceptual ethics: Sally Haslanger's argument that we should use race and gender concepts with certain contents. Roughly, Haslanger advocates for the idea that we should use our existing race and gender terminology to express concepts that pick out the following kind of "socially constructed" properties: ones that concern the ways in which an individual is either systematically subordinated or privileged along certain dimensions (economic, political, legal, etc.) as a result of being imagined by others to possess particular features that purportedly reveal biological, ancestral, or other socially salient facts.[33] Haslanger initially presents this as a normative proposal about which race and gender concepts to use, which involves a *shift* from using our current concepts. Roughly, Haslanger's idea is that we should use existing race and terminology to express *new* concepts. Her hope is that use of these

[31] It should be noted that our imagined Nietzschean's conclusion does not require especially exotic views about content-determination. This is because, on many orthodox theories of content-determination, our ability to *control* the content of concepts that play certain roles may be limited or absent. For discussion, see (Cappelen 2018).

[32] See (Schroeter and Schroeter 2014).

[33] See (Haslanger 2000).

concepts – by certain people (e.g. certain feminist activists), in certain contexts (e.g. engaging in political organizing) – will better advance specific theoretical and practical goals, including the pursuit of social justice. Now suppose that Haslanger's advocacy for these changes were successful in such a way that they became generally accepted by English speakers for the remainder of the existence of our linguistic tradition. Schroeter and Schroeter's theory suggests that in this case, Haslanger's account might turn out to have been the correct *descriptive* account of the meaning of our race and gender terms all along.[34]

We have been exploring theories of content-determination which, if true, would complicate the distinction between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity. It is worth emphasizing that there are many influential theories of content-determination where this is not true. On such theories, content is fully grounded by some combination of features such as user or community dispositions, causal regulation, counterfactual dependence, or etiological "teleofunctionalism". On these latter theories, the contrast between the descriptive project of metanormative inquiry and the normative project of the conceptual ethics of normativity will typically be just as stark as it initially appears.

Let us sum up. We began this section by arguing that there are two apparently deep contrasts between the projects of metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity. If this is right, it *matters* which of these projects one is engaged in: which project one is engaged in will affect what sorts of questions it makes sense to ask in one's project, and what sorts of evidence and argument are relevant to one's inquiry. We then considered certain views about content-determination that complicate this contrast. We have argued that, even if we take such views seriously, the contrast – and its significance – remains.

4. The projects are complementary, not competitors

We have just argued that there is a deep contrast between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity, both in terms of the scope of these projects and, more fundamentally, in terms of what

[34]In some of her work, Haslanger herself is sympathetic to this upshot. See, for example, her discussions in (Haslanger 2006) and (Haslanger 2010), in contrast to the view in (Haslanger 2000), on which her argument is more clearly seen as a revisionist proposal. For some of Haslanger's own recent methodological reflections that bear on how to best read these previous proposals, see (Haslanger 2020). For another externalist metasemantic view that arguably has much the same result as Schroeter and Schroeter's view for how to read Haslanger's core "ameliorative" work on race and gender concepts, see (Ball 2020).

they aim to accomplish. This naturally raises a question: is one of these projects *better* or more *important* than the other? In this section, we argue that it is a mistake to expect anything like a context-free answer to which of these projects is more philosophically important *simpliciter*. This is because we take both projects to be valuable, and indeed to be complementary. We explain why by exploring some central motives for engaging in each of these projects.[35]

To begin, note that both projects can be motivated in part by appeal to the seemingly distinctive significance of our normative thought and talk. Such thought and talk is implicated in a host of ways in what we care about, how we act, how we engage with each other, and in our social and political arrangements.

This distinctive significance suggests a compelling initial motive for engaging in metanormative inquiry: to better understand the actual normative thought, talk, and reality that plays these structuring roles in our lives.

At the same time, the distinctive significance of our normative thought and talk also suggests a compelling motive for engaging in the conceptual ethics of normativity. *Given* their central role in our lives, you might think that it is especially important to critically examine our normative words and concepts, and to consider alternatives. This is especially clear if we consider the possibility that these concepts might be *bad to use* in the ways we use them, whether due to ideological influence or historical happenstance.

We also think that interest in the conceptual ethics of normativity, and especially certain views about it, very often play central roles in motivating metanormative inquiry. There is a simple general reason why interest in the project of the conceptual ethics of normativity can motivate engaging in metanormative inquiry. This is that it is plausible that properly *understanding* our actual concepts is a crucial step in intelligently *evaluating* them.[36]

[35]Our take here thus differs from at least the general *presentation* of many takes on conceptual engineering in ethics or other areas of normative inquiry. For example, in (Eklund 2017), Eklund discusses conceptual engineering as a kind of philosophical *methodology* or *approach* to metaethics (and other areas of philosophy). This can be read as suggesting that the conceptual ethics of normativity is in competition with other (purely descriptive) approaches to metaethics. One might have a similar impression from reading (Haslanger 2000) for many of the same reasons. Perhaps most explicitly, important work in progress by Knut Skarsaune and Eric Campbell suggests that the best way of understanding what (at least a significant part of) metaethical inquiry is (or should be) is as, in effect, a species of the conceptual ethics of normativity. See (Skarsaune Manuscript) and (Campbell Manuscript). This could be read as suggesting that metanormative inquiry (understood as the descriptive project we take it to be) is less valuable than the conceptual ethics of normativity, or as valuable primarily in the service of it.

[36]For connected discussion on this point, see (Plunkett 2016) and (Vargas 2019).

It is also easy to find examples of canonical metanormative inquiry that is partly motivated by background views or concerns in conceptual ethics. In one class of cases, metanormative inquiry is motivated by a concern to vindicate certain normative views. An unusually explicit example is provided by David Enoch, in a passage from which he takes the title of his book *Taking Morality Seriously*:

> I pretheoretically feel that nothing short of a fairly strong metaethical realism will vindicate our taking morality seriously.[37]

Enoch is interested in whether he can *vindicate* some of his core pre-theoretic beliefs about morality, which he thinks would be good to do. If we assume that "taking morality seriously" in part involves giving moral words and concepts central roles in our deliberation and evaluation, Enoch's question of vindication is a question in conceptual ethics. Enoch thinks that such a vindication of our actual moral thought and talk would require a certain metanormative view to be true: a form of non-naturalistic realism that he calls 'Robust Realism'.[38]

In another class of cases, metanormative inquiry is motivated by the conceptual ethics concern that our existing moral thought and talk might be defective in some deep way. For example, in *The Moral Problem*, Michael Smith motivates metaethical inquiry by identifying alleged features of the "idea of morality" that suggest that this idea may be incoherent.[39] Smith's own theory offered in that book is dedicated to showing that the idea of morality is not defective in this way.[40]

It is also the case that work in the conceptual ethics of normativity can be motivated by metanormative inquiry or views. Consider one central example. There is now a considerable literature in the conceptual ethics of normativity that is motivated by the metanormative view that error theory is (or might be) true of morality. In light of the purported truth

[37](Enoch 2011, 8).

[38]A related famous example is provided by Derek Parfit's claim that "nothing matters" if certain metanormative views turn out to be true, and thus that much of his life would then turn out to have been "wasted" (Parfit 2011, Vol II, 367). This motivates Parfit to defend a metanormative view (a quietist form or non-naturalistic realism) on which things *do* matter by his lights. See also connected discussion in (Parfit 2006). We suspect that such motives for engaging in metanormative inquiry, and for defending certain views within it, are more widely shared than advertised. One reason for not advertising them (which might well be at least tacitly appreciated by many philosophers) is noted by Mark Schroeder in (Schroeder 2016): the sort of "loaded stakes" Parfit makes salient might give us reason for "caution in trusting" Parfit's intuitive metanormative verdicts.

[39](Smith 1994, 11).

[40]Another example: Simon Blackburn at one point suggests that the aim of his "quasi-realist" form of expressivism is to save the expressivist from having to grant that our ordinary moral thought is "infected root and branch with philosophical myth." (Blackburn 2006, 154).

(or plausibility) of metanormative error theory, philosophers have advocated for "revolutionary fictionalism"[41], "moral abolitionism"[42], "revolutionary expressivism"[43], and "moral conservationism".[44]

These facts about our motivations for engaging in one (or both) of these projects do not undermine the distinction we are emphasizing between them. This is because the distinction we emphasize relies on the contrasting success conditions of the projects, rather than on the motivations one has for explicitly engaging in those projects. Enoch provides a clear example. The project of his book is to defend the truth of Robust Realism. If the thesis of Robust Realism is true *qua* a contribution to metanormative inquiry, it is so insofar as it helps explain how actual normative thought, talk, and reality fit into reality. This is true *whether or not* Enoch's motivating assumption in conceptual ethics is correct, and, more generally, regardless of why he started working on metanormative inquiry in the first place.

We take this discussion to illustrate our central point in this section. We have argued in this paper that metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity are distinct projects. But this does not mean that they are *competitors*: rather, we have argued that they are complementary. As we have seen, they can both be motivated by the significance of normative thought and talk, and each can be powerfully motivated by views or concerns that arise in the other.

On our view, then, we have reasons to engage in both projects. Happily, we think there is no serious pressure to choose between these projects. We can hope for a social division of labor here, with important work being done on both projects. Our own view is that, given the relative balance of that division of labor thus far, we would be happy to see *more* philosophers working explicitly on the conceptual ethics of normativity than currently do. But this in no way suggests that philosophers should neglect metanormative inquiry.

5. How the distinction Illuminates existing debates

At the start of this paper, we suggested that attending to the distinction between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity can help to promote progress in both projects. In the remainder of the

[41]See (Joyce 2001).
[42]See (Garner 2007).
[43]See (Köhler and Ridge 2013).
[44]See (Olson 2014).

paper, we explain how it can do so. We begin by explaining how attention to the distinction can help us to better understand and evaluate some prominent contemporary views. These views are often classified as ones in "metaethics", but either explicitly or implicitly make major contributions to the conceptual ethics project, or are ambiguous in their relation to that project (§§5.1-5.3). Following this, in §6 and §7, we draw on this discussion to explain how attention to the distinction between metanormative and conceptual ethics projects can illuminate new theoretical options and help us to avoid bad arguments.

5.1 Illuminating existing debate: explicit cases

Some important research that is often classified as work in "metaethics" is *explicitly* framed by its authors in a way that makes it also (if not primarily) a contribution to what we have called "the conceptual ethics of normativity". We have argued that metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity have strikingly different aims. In light of this, making salient that this work is a contribution to conceptual ethics can clarify how to understand and engage with it.

We have already seen two examples of work in the conceptual ethics of normativity: Railton's work on "reforming definitions" of central moral terminology and the "after error theory" literature. Consider a third example: Matti Eklund's recent *Choosing Normative Concepts*.[45] This book offers a sustained discussion of foundational issues about the conceptual ethics of normativity. Eklund is clear that his core concern is not with better understanding our actual ethical thought and talk, but with normative issues about *possible* ethical thought, talk, and reality. Eklund explicitly casts his project as one in "conceptual engineering", which he (like us) takes to be closely connected to what we call "conceptual ethics".[46]

If our discussion is correct, it is illuminating to understand these above examples as conceptual ethics projects, rather than as metanormative projects, or, as is common, part of "metaethics". This is because doing so helps to focus our attention on the particular kind of project these philosophers are engaged in.[47] This is in turn important because we should

[45](Eklund 2017).

[46]Indeed, some of what Eklund writes suggests that he takes 'conceptual ethics' and 'conceptual engineering' to basically be synonymous. See (Eklund 2017, 15 and 192).

[47]It is worth emphasizing that our point here is compatible with the idea that the examples just discussed include claims and arguments that constitute important contributions to metanormative inquiry. This follows both from our earlier point that a given claim (or argument, etc.) can matter to multiple different projects, such as mattering to both substantive ethical inquiry and to metaethics,

evaluate the ideas, arguments, questions, etc. in these discussions in different ways, depending on how they fit into these different projects. This is for two reasons. First, one important way to evaluate the plausibility of an idea is in a holistic manner, given its role in an overall theory. To do so, we need to know what kind of theory the overall theory *is*, and what its success conditions are. For example: is the theory meant to be a contribution to understanding how our actual normative and thought work, or rather a normative proposal about how they should work? Second, depending on which project we see a thesis contributing to most fundamentally, we might change our views about what that thesis *is*, and thus how to evaluate it.

5.2 Illuminating existing debate: ambiguity

In §4, we argued that concerns about conceptual ethics motivate much work in "metaethics". Under such circumstances, the fact that a clear distinction between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity is not salient in the literature means that many important discussions are ambiguous with respect to the degree to which (and when) they are contributing to each project. Here, we offer four prominent examples of such ambiguity, and explain their significance.

To begin, consider the following passage from Allan Gibbard, characterizing his expressivist view:

> Norm-expressivism is meant to capture whatever there is to ordinary notions of rationality if Platonism is excluded. […] My hope, then, is to save what is clear in ordinary thought about rationality, and to find our reflective thinking about rationality reasonably clear and fully rectifiable, with one exception: our wavering penchant for Platonism.[48]

It is possible to read this passage as the prologue to a metanormative project. For example, one such reading rests on the idea that our thought and talk using the concept RATIONAL isn't *deeply* committed to "Platonism" (roughly, the idea that there are non-naturalistic ethical facts at a fundamental explanatory level). Because of this, once we see the explanatory options on the table, we will see that Gibbard's

and our view about what it is to count as a "claim" (or "argument", etc.) in a given project. For example, in the process of putting forward normative proposals about how to use moral terminology, Railton *also* puts forward descriptive claims about how our actual moral thought and talk work. Those claims (among others he makes) might well be key contributions to the descriptive project of metanormative inquiry.

[48](Gibbard 1990, 154–155).

expressivism is the best overall descriptive account of actual thought and talk deploying the concept RATIONAL.

Strikingly, however, it is also possible to read Gibbard as engaging in conceptual ethics here. On this reading, he is signaling that his ultimate goal is not to develop a theory of our ordinary concept RATIONAL, but to identify which parts of our ordinary concept RATIONAL can and *should* be saved, once this concept has been put under critical scrutiny, and stripped of *undesirable* metaphysical commitments. For Gibbard in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, the concept RATIONAL is at the basis of his explanation for *all* of (at least putatively authoritative) normative thought and talk. Thus, such a revision to the concept RATIONAL would amount to an ambitious revisionary proposal for *all* of (at least putatively authoritative) normative thought and talk.

Next consider Christine Korsgaard's work in the *Sources of Normativity*.[49] Korsgaard famously argues that she wants to both *explain* and *justify* our use of core normative concepts (including, importantly, our moral concepts).[50] Korsgaard's relationship to metaethics is famously controversial.[51] We take our distinction to be potentially illuminating here. This is because it is attractive in many ways to understand Korsgaard as partly engaging in the conceptual ethics of normativity. After all, the aim of *justifying* our use of normative concepts has no obvious role in the descriptive project of metanormative inquiry, but fits smoothly into a project in conceptual ethics.

To see how such a reading of Korsgaard might go, consider the following (highly schematic) proposal for how to understand the particular "constitutivist" account of the foundations of practical normativity that she offers in *The Sources of Normativity*. The proposed reading we have in mind (which draws on core strands of Korsgaard's work) involves three major ideas. First, she can argue that the fact that we (as agents) are psychologically required to use certain normative concepts in order to be agents as such in turn *justifies* our use of those concepts. Second, she can argue that the deployment of those concepts picks out certain normative properties, which are authoritatively normative for us, in virtue of their being picked out by those concepts. Third, she can argue that our use of these concepts is further justified by the (purported) fact that it is only the use of these concepts – as opposed to alternatives that build in more thoroughly "realist" commitments – that allows us to

[49](Korsgaard 1996).
[50](Korsgaard 1996, 14–15).
[51]For a helpful overview of the issues here, see (Barry 2017).

smoothly solve our practical problems qua agents, and do so in a way that doesn't embroil us in any objectionable non-naturalistic metaphysics. Put together, this way of developing a Korsgaardian line makes use of descriptive facts about normative thought, talk, and reality that are at the heart of metanormative inquiry, but does so in the service of a justificatory conceptual ethics project that advocates for using certain normative concepts as opposed to others.

Third, consider Sharon Street's "Darwinian Dilemma" argument.[52] Street's argument ultimately aims to establish the credibility of a kind of *attitude-dependent* view of ethical reality. On one way of reading her argument, it aims to establish the thesis that normative knowledge is possible only if normative facts are attitude-dependent in the right way.[53] How should we understand the work this thesis is doing in her argument? On one reading, Street takes our having normative knowledge to be a plausible premise, and argues on that basis for attitude-dependence as a descriptive thesis about the reality that our current ethical thought and talk refers to.

Some strands of Street's work suggest a different reading, however. At least in certain argumentative contexts, Street is happy to read her core epistemic argument as a normative argument *all the way down*.[54] One way of developing this idea would be to see her argument as an instance of conceptual ethics. Roughly, on this reading, the idea is that we *should* deploy normative concepts whose extensions we can know, even if we are not currently using such concepts. And in light of this – in combination with other considerations in favor of these concepts (e.g. their ability to capture at least our core judgments about what agents should do in important cases) – she can argue that we *should* deploy normative concepts that pick out attitude-dependent normative properties, and guide our actions and lives based on them.

Finally, consider some of Pettit's work on freedom in political philosophy, where he defends a "republican" view of freedom, on which freedom is understood as a form of non-domination.[55] In a recent paper, Pettit puts forward methodological views about how to interpret

[52](Street 2006).
[53]We should note that, on another reading of (Street 2006), the core issue isn't about the *possibility* of our having normative knowledge (or perhaps something else related, such as epistemically justified normative beliefs), but rather about what *explains* our normative knowledge (or perhaps something else related, such as our reliability in normative judgment). See (Schechter 2017) for discussion. We leave this reading aside for the purposes of discussion, since the core points we make below can apply to either reading.
[54]See (Street 2011) and (Street 2016).
[55]See (Pettit 1999).

this earlier work.[56] He suggests that the sort of purely descriptive conceptual analysis he and Jackson put forward in "Moral Functionalism and Moral Motivation" (which we earlier discussed as a paradigm contribution to the project of metanormative inquiry, and metamoral inquiry in particular) leaves many important questions about our moral concepts open, which need to be answered by engaging in what he calls "philosophical analysis".

On one natural reading, Pettit's "philosophical analysis" involves a combination of descriptive inquiry (of the kind at the heart of metanormative inquiry) *and* engagement with the conceptual ethics of normativity. Pettit claims that the best way to read his work on the republican theory of freedom is as involving "philosophical analysis". Hence, on our reading, his work incorporates a conceptual ethics project concerning the concept FREEDOM.[57] However, such a reading, which suggests that Pettit's earlier work on freedom was in part a conceptual ethics project, is not explicit in that earlier work. Because of this, the relations of Pettit's work in political philosophy to metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity could easily appear ambiguous, in the absence of his recent clarification.

We take the interpretive questions we raise about these canonical figures to be important. Their work is rightly prominent, but we can only appropriately critically evaluate the different strands of their work if we understand how a given strand connects to the projects of metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity. As we have emphasized earlier, a given view they argue for within their work might, of course, be relevant to *both* projects. But, in many cases, we think that a given view will best be interpreted as more fundamentally contributing to either one or the other project, and that figuring out which one will matter for our understanding just what that view actually *is*, and for evaluating its plausibility.

5.3 Illuminating existing debate: implicit conceptual ethics?

The examples just discussed raise a general question: how often are contemporary philosophers engaging in the conceptual ethics of

[56](Pettit 2020).

[57]Indeed, Pettit himself gives a nod to this when he writes that the "freedom example illustrates nicely the approach that has come to be described as conceptual ethics." (Pettit 2020, 353, fn 23). We think this is correct. It should be noted, however, that Pettit's full self-interpretation of the relation of his "philosophical analysis" to conceptual ethics is slightly more complicated than this suggests, as he goes on to briefly discuss in that footnote. This is due to a number of factors: including, for example, how he thinks about the objects of normative reflection in each case.

normativity without doing so explicitly? This question can't be answered in a theory-neutral way. It interacts with our best developed theories about thought and talk. For example, if certain background hypotheses about thought and talk are correct, philosophers might *implicitly* be engaged in the conceptual ethics of normativity in a (perhaps surprisingly) wide range of work often thought of as "metaethical". To illustrate, we introduce a general hypothesis about normative thought and talk – the idea that it involves a lot of "metalinguistic negotiation" – on which implicit conceptual ethics is likely ubiquitous in contemporary so-called "metaethical" inquiry.[58]

To begin, consider the idea of a "metalinguistic dispute". In metalinguistic disputes, speakers (at least appear to) *use*, rather than mention, a term in order to put forward a view about the term itself. In some cases, the views put forward are about which concept a term *should* be used to express. This subset of metalinguistic disputes are "*normative* metalinguistic disputes" or, equivalently, "metalinguistic negotiations". For example, someone might assert "waterboarding is torture" in order to *advocate* for using the word 'torture' in such a way that acts of waterboarding fall into its extension.

Crucially, it need not be transparent to participants in an exchange whether a given exchange is a metalinguistic negotiation. For example, a metalinguistic negotiation about how we should use the term 'moral' might well involve statements that would *also* appear in a dispute in which linguistic issues were not central; e.g. statements such as "real morality is X" or the "true nature of morality is X". How much philosophical dispute involves metalinguistic negotiation, and how easily participants are able to tell whether they are engaging in metalinguistic negotiation, will both depend in part on complicated general issues concerning thought and talk. If philosophers regularly engage in metalinguistic negotiation throughout philosophy, as some have argued, then there is reason to think that happens in the context of work on "metaethics" as well.[59] If so, then it may be that many of the debates that are standardly thought of as "metaethical" are implicitly debates in the conceptual ethics of normativity.

[58]For further discussion of the idea of "metalinguistic negotiation", see (Plunkett and Sundell 2013a) and (Plunkett and Sundell 2013b), drawing on work from (Ludlow 2014) and (Barker 2002).

[59]See (Plunkett 2015), (Thomasson 2016), and (Ludlow 2014) for sympathetic discussion of the idea that metalinguistic negotiation (or something closely akin to it, in Ludlow's case) happens throughout philosophy.

6. Illuminating new theoretical and methodological options

Thus far, we have focused on the idea that the conceptual ethics of normativity may be occurring either explicitly or implicitly in work commonly classified as "metaethical". This suggests that our distinction between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity may be indispensable for properly *interpreting* much contemporary literature often classified as "metaethics". In this section, we suggest that attention to the distinction is fecund, even setting aside these interpretive hypotheses.

We begin by briefly returning to our four cases of alleged classificatory ambiguity: the views from Gibbard, Korsgaard, Street, and Pettit. Suppose we set aside which interpretations of these views are correct. We take the conceptual ethics readings of their views to generate substantively interesting theses that are deserving of attention, independently of whether they were intended by their authors. To illustrate, return to Street's work. Suppose that our current normative concepts don't pick out attitude-dependent facts. And suppose that the correct interpretation of Street is as putting forward a descriptive metanormative argument. Nonetheless, some of Street's arguments can be adapted to mount an important case for replacing or reforming certain normative concepts (e.g. REASON) that we currently deploy in our thought and talk, so that these concepts *do* pick out attitude-dependent facts. This shows that clearly distinguishing metanormative inquiry from the conceptual ethics of normativity puts us in a position to open up avenues for developing familiar ideas about normativity in potentially fruitful new directions.

Consider another example. Recall our earlier quote from Gibbard, in which he says he wants his expressivist account to "capture whatever there is to ordinary notions of rationality if Platonism is excluded."[60] Suppose that what Gibbard calls "our wavering penchant for Platonism"[61] *isn't* actually part of the meaning of any of our normative concepts. A philosopher might nonetheless be impressed by Enoch's thought that only a non-naturalistic realist view like Platonism could vindicate our taking morality seriously. She could argue on this basis for a kind of *revisionary* moral Platonism: if our moral concepts don't include a Platonist presupposition, they should be amended so that they do.[62] At the end of the day, it might

[60](Gibbard 1990, 154).
[61](Gibbard 1990, 155).
[62]Obviously, if error theory results, then the "after error theory, what?" question we briefly discussed earlier will loom large.

be that the deepest suspicion that many philosophers feel towards metanormative expressivism is rooted in this sort of conceptual ethics view, rather than in beliefs about how actual ethical thought and talk seem to operate.[63] It is important to emphasize that these objections are *not* objections to expressivism as a metanormative view: rather, they are objections to our using normative concepts of which such expressivism is true. These are thus objections fundamentally within the conceptual ethics of normativity.

These examples suggest two important general lessons. First, there is interesting, underexplored terrain here within the conceptual ethics of normativity, some of which might well help philosophers better explore and articulate some of their deepest ideas and commitments concerning normative thought, talk, and reality. Second, many considerations and distinctions that are prominent within metanormative inquiry will also be significant in the conceptual ethics of normativity, but will play substantially different roles.

7. Avoiding bad arguments

We close with what we take to be perhaps one of the most straightforward and important benefits of attending to our distinction. This is that attention to the distinction can help us to avoid bad arguments. Consider an example: it is common to treat views in the conceptual ethics of normativity, such as Railton's reforming account of 'moral goodness', as foils for explicitly *descriptive* metaethical views. But a view could be false as a description of actual ethical thought, talk, and reality, and yet still be an excellent normative proposal in the conceptual ethics of ethics. For example, Railton's view might be subject to a compelling "counterexample" which shows that it cannot be the correct view about our concept MORAL GOODNESS. But for all that, Railton's theory might be *wholly successful* as a proposal in conceptual ethics: his proposed replacement concept might be *better* than our actual concept MORAL GOODNESS (assuming there is a single such concept). Because of this, his proposed concept might be the concept we *should* be using. Indeed, it is possible that the very respects in which a proposal in conceptual ethics fails to be descriptively

[63]Consider Enoch's argument about the (purported) moral implications of objectivity (Enoch 2011, Ch. 2). He argues that these implications are at the heart of what is wrong with expressivism (much more so than, for instance, the Frege-Geach problem), and that these implications support his Robust Realist position. In this argument, Enoch attempts to draw metamoral implications from moral premises. If we suppose that our actual moral concepts failed to support those implications, a natural conceptual ethics reaction would be: *so much the worse for our actual moral concepts*.

adequate could also reveal ways in which our actual thought and talk could be improved.

Or consider again Street's attitude-dependent view of normative reality. One objection to her kind of view is that it makes normative knowledge *implausibly easy* to come by.[64] For example, her view might seem to imply that an agent could know a normative thesis simply on the basis that she would coherently believe it, under certain idealized conditions. Some philosophers (including at least one of the authors of this paper) find this to be an implausible sufficient condition for normative knowledge. If Street's view is understood as a descriptive thesis within metanormative inquiry, and has this epistemic consequence, this might form the basis for an objection to Street's view. But this objection only applies to Street's view if it is a descriptive thesis about our actual normative thought and talk. If Street is engaged in conceptual ethics, and advancing a claim about how we should reform our normative concepts, then ease of knowledge might simply be a virtue of her proposal.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the contrast between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity. In the first part of the paper, we put forward an account of the distinction between these two projects. In the second part, we then argued for the methodological import of this distinction, by illustrating a number of important upshots of paying attention to it.

In that discussion, we focused on how attention to the distinction between metanormative inquiry and the conceptual ethics of normativity matters for interpreting the work of other philosophers. It is important to emphasize that we also take such attention to be important when directed to one's own inquiry. Such attention can both guard against dangers and illuminate opportunities.

First consider the dangers. We have emphasized that the relationship between the kinds of motivations that philosophers have for engaging in either metanormative inquiry or the conceptual ethics of normativity, or for engaging in both, is quite complex. Given this entanglement, a philosopher might easily end up making claims and arguments that are ambiguous in their relation to the two projects, or implicitly switching from work aimed at

[64]For discussion of this style of epistemic objection to metaethical views, see (McPherson 2020, 35–36).

contributing to one project to work aimed at contributing to the other, without noticing this shift is happening. Because these projects have such different success conditions, this is a recipe for confusion and fallacious argument.[65]

More constructively, an explicit understanding of the contrast between these projects may enable one to better understand what one is currently doing, and what sorts of evidence and arguments are relevant to one's work. Moreover, an explicit understanding of the contrast between these projects can inform one's own understanding of the direction one's own future work should take, and why. It can provoke such questions as the following: does this work align with the motives that drive it? Might those motives in fact warrant a change of project? Might alternatives to those motives become salient if one explicitly considers the alternative project?

Because work focused on "morality" and "ethics" is in many ways the most developed branch of metanormative inquiry, much of our discussion here has focused on examples from those areas. However, as our framing the discussion in terms of metanormative inquiry instead of metaethics has meant to underscore (as well as our brief discussion of Pettit's work on the republican theory of freedom), the basic structural issues we have discussed generalize to normative domains beyond ethics (e.g. normative parts of political philosophy, epistemology, the philosophy of law, and aesthetics), and indeed to the normative domain as a whole. In some of these areas, it is less common than in ethics to pay systematic attention to the distinction between *normative* and *metanormative* inquiry. Although we cannot argue for it here, we think that progress can be made by clearly distinguishing these projects within other subareas of philosophy about normative topics, or our thought and talk about such topics.[66]

We conclude by noting one other reason why explicitly theorizing about the distinction between the projects of metanormative inquiry and conceptual ethics matters. This is that doing so can put us in a better position to identify distinctive challenges that face projects in the conceptual ethics of normativity, which is the less systemically explored of the two projects. Consider just one example.[67] One natural

[65]For related discussion of unreliable inference dangers, see (McPherson and Plunkett 2020).

[66]We take up this thread in (McPherson and Plunkett Manuscript), where we discuss the import of the distinctions between normative epistemology, metaepistemology, and the conceptual ethics of epistemology.

[67]For a variety of other distinctive illuminating challenges in the conceptual ethics of normativity, see (Eklund 2017).

worry about the conceptual ethics of normativity is that it can easily seem to involve a disturbing kind of *vindicatory circularity*. For example, if one argues that we ought to use the very concept OUGHT that one is deploying in the argument, this may seem objectionably circular, akin to "verifying" the accuracy of a ruler by checking it against itself.[68] No obvious correlate of this sort of challenge arises in metanormative inquiry. It is striking that, in the absence of an explicitly characterized project of conceptual ethics of normativity, this and other distinctive sorts of challenges have received relatively little sustained, explicit discussion. This is true even though some projects within the conceptual ethics of normativity, like Railton's work on "reforming definitions" of central moral terms, have received enormous critical attention. We hope our paper serves as a contribution to making such distinctive challenges about the conceptual ethics of normativity more visible, and putting them more squarely on the agenda for future philosophical work.

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[68]See (McPherson and Plunkett Forthcoming) for discussion of this "vindicatory circularity challenge", as well as (Burgess 2020) for connected discussion of charges of "hypocrisy" in conceptual ethics.

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