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Avoiding Moral Commitment

ABSTRACT: *I argue that relaxed moral realists are not ontologically committed to moral properties. Regardless of whether we tie ontological commitment to quantification, entailment, or truthmaking, if moral properties are not explanatory (as relaxed realists claim), then moral truths do not require moral properties. This permits a nominalist form of relaxed realism that is both simpler and more ecumenical than extant formulations. The possibility of such a position places pressure on the ontology of competing views—and helps focus attention on the critical and underexplored explanatory element of the relaxed realist's program.*

KEYWORDS: metaethics, moral realism, moral properties, ontological commitment, relaxed realism

Compare two metaethical theories. The first, *non-naturalism*, is familiar. Non-naturalists claim:

(i) There are objective, irreducible moral truths.
(ii) There are *sui generis* moral properties.[1]
(iii) Moral properties exist *simpliciter*.[2]

The virtues of non-naturalism are plain. The theory vindicates an important class of intuitions about the significance and autonomy of morality. But it does so with costs; its ontology of non-natural moral properties is deeply controversial. These costs inspire our second metaethical theory: *relaxed moral realism*.[3]

Like non-naturalists, relaxed realists say that there are objective, irreducible moral truths and *sui generis* moral properties. But they insist that moral properties are *metaphysically lightweight* and therefore unobjectionable. In particular, they deny (iii); they claim that moral properties have a different ontological status from

[1] For ease of exposition, I will focus on moral properties throughout, but similar claims apply to moral relations and moral facts.

[2] I assume that to exist *simpliciter* is to exist in the only sense of 'exists' that the Quinean metaontological orthodoxy allows. See e.g. Lewis (1990), Van Inwagen (2009), and Sider (2009). If a thing exists *simpliciter*, then it exists in the same sense that stars, protons, and buildings exist; its existence is not trivial or 'lightweight', nor does it exist only relative to a domain or framework.

[3] Alternative labels for this view include "non-metaphysical non-naturalism" (Parfit 2011: 486), "non-realist cognitivism" (Parfit 2017: 60), "avant-garde non-naturalism" (Copp 2018), "ontologically modest non-naturalism" (Hurka 2014: 90), and "metaphysically quietist normative realism" (McPherson 2011). I will simply speak of "relaxed realism" throughout and will translate other authors accordingly.

other things. Thus Parfit (2011: 479) suggests that moral properties exist in a "non-ontological sense." Scanlon (2014: 19) says that moral properties exist only relative to the moral domain. Dworkin (1996) argues that there is no "Archimedean standpoint" from which the ontology of a moral theory can be appraised, and thus moral properties can be accepted or rejected only for moral—not ontological—reasons.

Unlike their heavier counterparts, the lightweight moral properties of relaxed realism are not *explanatory*. Traditional non-naturalists believe that moral truth consists in correspondence with a metaphysically prior moral reality: 'Sally's act is right' is true because Sally's act instantiates the *sui generis* property of rightness. Similarly the utilitarian principle is true because of some complex, worldly fact which binds together the properties of rightness and maximizing utility.

Relaxed realists reject these claims. Parfit writes:

> Metaphysical Non-Naturalists believe that, when we make irreducibly normative claims, these claims imply that there exist some ontologically weighty non-natural entities or properties. Naturalists find such claims mysterious or incredible. [Relaxed realists] deny that normative claims have any such ontological implications. *On this view, normative claims are not made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality*. (2017: 60; emphasis mine)

Thus moral truths are not dependent on a prior moral reality. Instead, moral truth comes first, and moral properties are allowed only insomuch as they are *involved* in these truths. The familiar connection between truth and existence is reversed: there is such a property as rightness only because there are truths about what is right (Parfit 2017: 66-67; Scanlon 2014: 17, 26; Dworkin 1996: 96-97).[4]

This reversal is supposed to reinforce the autonomy of moral philosophy and shield the relaxed realist from ontological objections. Non-naturalists say that moral theorizing should not be constrained by external *empirical* truths. Relaxed realists say that moral theorizing should not be constrained by external *metaphysical* truths (Scanlon 2014: 19). Morality is autonomous and fundamental moral truths (such as moral principles, and other ethical claims that do not involve the existence of particular objects, events, or states of affairs) do not depend upon truths in other fields, including ontology. Thus we might accept a utilitarian ethic because of its impartiality or reject it because it gives insufficient weight to justice. But concerns about the nature or existence of moral properties, familiar since Mackie (1977), should not worry us. Moral truths do not rely on

[4] Copp (2018) argues that there is another role that moral properties must play. Traditional realists take moral language to be *representational*; they say e.g. that the semantic value of 'good' is determined by the fact that 'good' *represents* the property of goodness. Yet if moral properties are not explanatory, then they cannot play this role. Tiefensee (2021) explores how this challenge can be met by a conceptual role metasemantics.

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the existence of moral properties; such properties are merely an ontological shadow cast by the truths that we discover in doing normative ethics.

Many are suspicious of the relaxed realist's lightweight but *sui generis* moral properties: their nature, role, and alleged immunity to metaphysical investigation seems mysterious (Hayward 2019; Enoch and McPherson 2017; Mintz-Woo 2018). I am sympathetic with these concerns but hope they can be circumvented. I do not aim to make the relaxed realist's lightweight ontology more palatable; I argue instead that relaxed realists can do without moral properties entirely. Indeed, removing moral properties would make little difference to the heart of the view. We could continue to maintain that:

> There are objective, irreducible moral truths.

And that:

> Moral philosophy is immune to concerns about its ontology.

But we would justify this second claim in a new way: moral philosophy is immune from ontological concerns not because there are moral properties that somehow resist metaphysical investigation, but because the existence of objective, irreducible moral truths does not require the existence of moral properties.

How can this nominalist revision to relaxed realism be achieved? We might require moral properties if (i) moral properties are explanatory or (ii) moral truths ontologically commit us to the existence of moral properties. As we have seen, relaxed realists deny (i); they believe that morality is independent from ontology and thus fundamental moral truths are not explained by appealing to the existence of anything, including moral properties. But this, on its own, tells us little about (ii).

Consider an analogy: to accept '2 is prime' is (plausibly) to *commit* oneself to numbers. And this commitment does not wane, even if we say also that numbers exist in a non-ontological sense or that they exist only relative to the mathematical domain. Similarly, 'there are chairs in this room' may commit us to chairs even if, as the mereological nihilist protests, composite objects are explanatorily idle. In the same way, 'Sally's act is right' may commit us to rightness, even if the existence of moral properties is not substantial or explanatory.

Thus to dispense with moral properties, we cannot merely claim that moral properties are not explanatory; we must argue also that moral claims do not carry ontological commitment to moral properties. In what follows, I attend to this task. First, I examine popular theories of ontological commitment, including quantifier, entailment, and truthmaker accounts; for each, I show that the truth of moral sentences does not carry commitment to moral properties. I then examine how the possibility of a nominalist form of relaxed realism might affect the debate over the metaphysics of moral realism more generally. I conclude by briefly exploring how the relaxed realist position should be further developed.

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§1: The Quinean Account

What does it mean for a sentence or theory to commit us to the existence of a thing? The ontological commitments of a claim are what it asks of our ontology, what must exist if the statement is to be true. So understood, the ontological commitments of a claim are part of what it *demands of the world*.[5]

An *account* of ontological commitment should be a kind of test—it should deliver an impartial verdict about what must exist according to a sentence or theory. Quine's quantifier account is still popular:

> The ontology to which an (interpreted) theory is committed comprises all and only the objects over which the [first-order] bound variables of the theory have to be construed as ranging in order that the statements affirmed in the theory be true. (1951: 11)

Quine's view is more complex than it appears, but its precisifications will not be relevant here.[6] According to all versions of the Quinean orthodoxy, it is the subject and not the predicate that does the work: 'elephants are gray' commits us to gray elephants but not to grayness. This is because it is only elephants—not their features—that must be among the values of the first-order bound variables in our translation of 'elephants are gray'.

Thus standard moral predications will not carry commitment to moral entities. 'Sally's act is right' commits us to acts, not to rightness. And much the same will be true of claims about what is good, who is virtuous, and so on.

Yet in doing moral philosophy, we say not only that Sally's act is right, but that rightness is derivative and goodness fundamental; we wonder not only whether Lucy is virtuous but how virtues are tied to dispositions. In answering these questions, we must quantify over moral properties and so seemingly commit ourselves to such entities.

Still, we also quantify over holes, cracks, average students, and sakes, without accepting the existence of such entities. On the Quinean view, our ontological commitments arise not from our uninterpreted claims but from the translations of our claims into canonical first-order logic. As a result, it is possible to *paraphrase away* commitment to entities.[7] If we do not believe in things like holes, our aim is to be able to reconstruct our assertions to avoid quantification over such entities. The paraphrases we accept may be cumbersome (it is easier to say that the cheese has three holes than it is to say that the cheese is shaped such that there are three non-overlapping space-time regions entirely surrounded by cheese). But the loss in eloquence is worth the gain in parsimony.

[5] My discussion of ontological commitment closely follows Bricker (2016). See also Rayo (2007).

[6] See Van Inwagen (2009) for an explication and defense of Quine's program.

[7] There are well-known objections to traditional paraphrase strategies (see e.g. Jackson 1977; 1980), but these objections are inconclusive—showing that some proposed paraphrase is not synonymous with the claim being paraphrased cannot establish that paraphrase (or, better, replacement) is impossible (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002: 92). Further, robust replies are available on behalf of the paraphrase strategist (Keller 2015; 2017).

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Of course, holes and cracks are clearly eliminable; rightness and goodness are not. But consider austere property nominalists, who think properties of any sort are as worrisome as holes and cracks. They trade 'orange is a color' for 'everything orange is colored'; they trade 'intelligence is a feature Linus and Lucy share' for 'both Linus and Lucy are intelligent.' In so doing, they hope to avoid quantification over anything that is not concrete and particular. Can the relaxed realist do the same?

I suggest that, in general, claims that quantify over moral properties may be replaced with claims about the inferential and explanatory relations between moral sentences. To say that rightness is derivative and goodness fundamental is to say that sentences of the form '*x* is right' are grounded in sentences of the form '*y* is good'. (I hope for my position to be ontologically modest, and so I assume only that grounding is a sentential connective that obeys certain inference rules. See Bliss and Trogdon (2021)). To say that virtues are settled dispositions is to say that every sentence of the form '*x* is a virtue' implies '*x* is a settled disposition'.

Of course, some first-order moral sentences can appear to be ontological but non-inferential; consider 'Sally has a reason to help Lucy', or 'Linus has a right to his blanket.' These sentences are often understood as existential statements about rights or reasons. But we can reject this interpretation and instead appeal to locutions such as '*a* is a reason for *B* to *c*' or '*a* has a right to *B*' and paraphrase accordingly.

Other examples are admittedly more worrisome. Following Shafer-Landau (2003), Nolan (2014) focuses on:

> Tim's virtue deserves reward.

The most immediate paraphrase is:

> Tim deserves a reward because Tim is virtuous.

Nolan objects that this paraphrase fails: perhaps Tim's virtue merits reward, but there are some other, countervailing truths that count against his being rewarded. Yet it is unclear what this shows. To paraphrase a sentence is not to endorse a general translation scheme. Quine writes:

> [The relation between a sentence, S, and its paraphrase, S′] is just that the particular business that the speaker was on that occasion trying to get on with, with the help of S among other things, can be managed well enough to suit him by using S′ instead of S. We can even let him modify his purposes under the shift, if he pleases. Hence the importance of taking as the paradigmatic situation that in which the original speaker does his own paraphrasing, as laymen do in their routine dodging of ambiguities. The speaker can be advised in his paraphrasing, and on occasion he can even be enjoined to accept a proposed paraphrase or substitute another or hold his peace; but his choice is the only one that binds him. (1960: 160)

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If paraphrase can be contextual in the way that Quine suggests, then our task is not to find *the* paraphrase for these sentences, but to be able to provide a possible replacement for each way we might fill in the relevant contextual parameters. If, as Nolan imagines, we think Tim's deservingness is outweighed by some other consideration, then we can say:

> If it were not for these other morally relevant truths, then it would be true that Tim deserves a reward because Tim is virtuous.

And if we instead spoke without intending to commit one way or the other, we might simply understand our utterance as:

> Tim *prima facie* deserves to be rewarded because Tim is virtuous.

§2: Moral Things and Moral Qualities

The paraphrase strategy may seem *ad hoc*. We wish to eliminate commitment to moral properties, so we reinterpret seemingly innocent sentences to avoid commitment. How can such reinterpretation be defended?

This is an important challenge. The justification for our paraphrases cannot, I think, be only to avoid commitment. Rather the challenge calls for a positive, independently plausible vision of reality, such that the paraphrases proposed better capture this reality.

Begin with the general case: consider how we might justify the paraphrases that *global* property nominalists provide. Property nominalists think that everything that exists is *concrete* and *particular*; they posit a fundamental ontology of *things*. To allow properties is to divide a thing into its particularity and its qualities, making both mysterious, they claim. Thus it may be true that some elephant is gray, massive, and muddy. But these are mere *descriptions* of the elephant. The elephant and its environs are sufficient to satisfy these predicates; properties—whether universal or particular—are not needed. The property nominalist may therefore say that they provide paraphrases not merely to avoid commitment but to represent things as they are.

This global strategy can be applied locally. We say that though there are acts, situations, and persons, there are no moral qualities of these things. Again, to separate things from their moral qualities is to make both mysterious and thus invite complaints about the 'queerness' of moral properties. In the same way that the elephant can satisfy the predicate 'is gray' without ontological assistance, some acts—such as saving a drowning child, or calling your mother on her birthday—can satisfy the predicate 'is right' without ontological assistance.

If we are *moral particularists*, this may be a brute fact; if we are moral *generalists*, a theory of right action may tell us what must be true for 'is right' to apply. Regardless, our only concern is the conditions under which moral predicates are true of things; there is no ontological issue to engage with.

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We can, then, provide a vision of morality that justifies the paraphrases I have proposed. But it proceeds from a *general* property nominalism. Can we provide a similar explanation without rejecting properties wholesale?

This question is merely an instance of a broader puzzle: what might justify us in accepting some properties but not others? Perhaps the most common answer is that we should endorse a *causal restriction* on our ontology and accept only those properties that are needed to explain the causal powers of things (Armstrong 1978: 45-46). This would leave us with a broadly scientific conception of properties and so eliminate non-natural moral properties immediately.

As stated, the causal restriction will be unattractive to relaxed realists; they are hostile to a broader philosophical naturalism. But the insight behind the causal restriction can be generalized. What is important is not whether a property helps to explain causal powers *per se* but whether it helps to explain what needs to be explained. We may disagree about what needs to be explained or how this explanation is to proceed, of course. But we need not settle this debate here; our interest is in the relaxed realist. And if we should posit only properties that are explanatory—and we allow, as relaxed realists do, that moral properties are not explanatory—then we will have sufficient justification for our paraphrases.

§3: Second-order Quantifier and Entailment Criteria

Some claim that Quine's focus on first-order quantification is myopic: we should instead say that a sentence is committed to the entities that its first-order *and second-order* quantifiers must range over. This criterion takes predication seriously; it claims that 'elephants are gray' commits us to elephants *and* to grayness. So, too, 'some acts are right' should commit us both to acts *and* to their rightness.

Yet this conclusion does not quite follow, even if we accept the second-order account of commitment. This is because the values of our second-order bound variables need not be *properties*. The value of the second-order variable in the translation of 'elephants are gray' can be understood as the *set* of gray things. Similarly, the second-order account of commitment need not imply that 'some acts are right' is committed to the property of rightness; this statement may commit us only to the set of right things.

Some may object that the set of right acts *just is* the familiar *sui generis* property of rightness that non-naturalists posit. But a non-natural moral property—whether lightweight or otherwise—cannot be identified with the set of its instances. As Jackson (1998: 118-125) shows, for every moral property F, there is some disjunctive natural property G such that for any possible entity x, x is F if and only if x is G. Sets are identical when they are coextensive, however. So if properties are sets, then every moral property must be identical with some natural property. But non-natural properties cannot, of course, be identical with natural properties.

If this defense fails to convince, a more radical reply is available: we can reinterpret second-order quantifiers as *plural* quantifiers. Plural quantification has traditionally been eliminated in terms of first-order quantification over sets; we trade 'there are some books on the shelf' for 'there is a set of books on the shelf.' But, following Boolos (1984), we may reject this reduction and take plural quantification to be

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legitimate: we can allow that "to be is to be the value of some variable or the values of some variables." If we accept this reinterpretation of the second-order quantifiers, we can say that the values of the second-order bound variables in our translation of 'some acts are right' are simply *the right things*. To say that 'some acts are right' is only to say that there *are* right things, and some acts are among them.

I conclude that the second-order quantifier account does not require ontological commitment to moral properties. So let us focus instead on the *entailment criterion*. This account maintains that the ontological commitments of a sentence are the things that the sentence entails exist. The rationale is clear: if a theory *entails* that a thing exists, surely it is committed to its existence. And if a theory does not entail that a thing exists, in what sense could the theory require it?

The entailment criterion has advantages over both first-order and second-order quantifier views. 'Elephants are gray' commits us to elephants, but it also seems to commit us to trunks and tusks, ears and eyes. Yet these things need not be among the values of our first-order or second-order bound variables in the canonical translation of 'elephants are gray.' Consequently, as Bricker (2016) and Rayo (2007) note, quantifier accounts *under-generate* our commitments. But the entailment criterion avoids this concern: 'elephants are gray' entails that there are elephants, and the existence of elephants entails the existence of trunks and tusks as well.

However, the entailment view is of little use as an independent test for commitment. The question of whether 'elephants are gray' commits us to grayness is simply converted into the question of whether 'elephants are gray' entails that grayness exists. And the property nominalist and the property realist will disagree, with little recourse to a resolution.

Given this, a relaxed realist who wishes to do without moral properties can simply insist that 'some acts are right' entails that right acts exist but does not entail that rightness exists. This is no more *ad hoc* or worrisome than the property nominalist's equally unsurprising claim that 'elephants are gray' entails that gray elephants exist but does not entail that grayness exists.

(Some, such as Michael (2008), suggest that we should focus not on *modal entailment* but on *a priori entailment*. I remain neutral on this issue, but it will not affect our argument: it is not clear that e.g. 'elephants are gray' modally entails that there is grayness nor is it clear that 'elephants are gray' *a priori* entails that there is grayness. And *mutatis mutandis* for 'some acts are right' and rightness.)

§4: Truthmaking

Turn finally to the truthmaker account. Every truth requires a truthmaker: for every true claim, there must be something in the world that guarantees the truth of that claim. Thus, again, if we think of the ontological commitments of a claim as (part of) what it asks of the world, and we believe that all truths require a truthmaker, then it is natural to say that a sentence ontologically commits us to the things that must exist for it to be made true (Armstrong 2004: 23-24; Cameron 2008).

The truthmaking view looks dangerous for nominalists of any stripe. Essential predications can be made true by particular things: if our elephant is necessarily gray, then he can make 'this elephant is gray' true. But if our elephant might be plaid or

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polka dotted, then he cannot necessitate this truth: he might exist and yet fail to be gray. We need something whose mere *existence* can ensure that it is true that the elephant is gray. The most familiar option is the (worldly, concrete) fact <this elephant is gray>—which has the universal *being gray* as a constituent.

Similarly, every contingent moral predication seems to require a moral *fact* to make it true. If Linus is contingently good, then the claim 'Linus is good' cannot be made true by Linus; we must appeal instead to (something like) the fact <Linus is good>. But moral facts have moral properties as constituents. Traditional realists may therefore conclude that the truthmaker account makes it impossible to avoid commitment.

Yet this conclusion can be resisted; it assumes that if *A* makes *B* true, then the existence of *A* necessitates the truth of *B*. Call this view *truthmaker essentialism*. It is no part of the truthmaker account of *ontological commitment* that truthmakers must necessitate. We can instead allow that *A* can make *B* true even if *A* could exist though *B* is false. Parsons (1999: 329) writes:

> Let's get the nominalistic picture clear: a red rose, let us say, makes true the sentence 'This rose is red'. But that sentence is only a contingent truth (let us grant). In another possible world, that very rose (or its counterpart) exists, and is yellow. In that world, the rose does not make true 'This rose is red', and instead makes true 'This rose is yellow'… [Or] consider a case where contingency is replaced with change: a certain beacon takes the form of a light that alternates between glowing red and glowing green. When it is red, it makes true the sentence 'The beacon is red', but when it becomes green, it stops making this sentence true, and starts making 'The beacon is green' true.[8]

Truthmaker essentialism suggests that the relation between existence and truth is *necessitation*: every truth must be necessitated by something (or things). Parsons, like Lewis (1992) and Bricker (2006), recommends only *supervenience*: what is true must supervene upon what there is and what it is like. This weaker relation between truths and truthmakers allows that a red rose can make it true that 'this is a red rose'—and that a good person can make it true that 'this is a good person.'

I cannot defend the views of Parsons and his allies without taking us too far afield. But their position is plausible and fits neatly with the nominalist form of relaxed realism we have considered.

Yet even if contingent moral predications can be made true by the particular things they are about, what could make fundamental moral claims, such as e.g. utilitarianism, true? These claims are purely moral and so do not depend on anything non-moral. Thus it seems that the only candidate for a truthmaker for utilitarianism would be some complicated fact tying the properties of rightness and maximizing utility together.

[8] See also Briggs (2012).

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Relaxed realists deny that fundamental moral claims substantively depend on reality. So if there is any dependence between these fundamental moral truths and reality, it is *trivial*. I therefore suggest that everything makes fundamental moral truths true. Fundamental moral truths do not depend on contingencies and so cannot vary from world to world. Such truths are necessary—and everything guarantees the truth of a necessary truth. My existence may guarantee that 2+2=4; the existence of this sentence may guarantee that utilitarianism is true.

The claim that necessary truths possess only trivial truthmakers is not uncommon in the broader debate over truthmaking. Asay (2020: 58) argues:

> A necessary truth would seem to be a truth that is true regardless of how the world is. It is not contingent: its truth-value does not depend on what is going on in the world. Change the world however you like and necessary truths remain true. That being so, it's unclear how such truths can make any difference to ontology.[9]

Some, like Rodriguez-Pereyra (2005), reject this picture: they insist that truthmaking is *explanatory* and that *trivial* explanations are impossible. But it is unclear that truthmaking is an explanatory relation. As Fine (2012) argues, explanatory structures often have levels: the biological depends on the chemical, the chemical depends on the atomic, and so on. Thus an explanatory relation should allow that *A* might be explained by *B*, which might be explained by *C*, and so on. But truthmaking has no such structure; it is a direct connection between what exists and what is true. So if *B* makes *A* true, then there is no further explanatory question we can ask about *B* using truthmaking. Further, explanation seems to be hyperintensional: explanations for necessarily equivalent truths need not be identical. But we have understood truthmaking in terms of either necessitation or supervenience—and neither is hyperintensional.

I therefore suggest that we think of truthmaking primarily as a modal tool for investigating what truths require of our ontology, and so allow trivial truthmakers for fundamental moral truths. But if moral principles may have trivial truthmakers, then moral properties are not needed to make them true. Thus moral principles do not carry ontological commitment to moral properties.

However, note that even if we insist that truthmaking *is* explanatory, this need not undermine our attempt to avoid commitment to moral properties. Akhlaghi (2022) assumes that truthmaking is explanatory but shows that relaxed realists like Parfit can nonetheless avoid commitment. While I say that *everything* makes fundamental moral claims true, Akhlaghi suggests that *nothing* makes fundamental moral claims true. Fundamental moral truths are not explained by non-moral truths; to deny this would be to lapse into a kind of naturalism. Nor are fundamental moral truths explained by other moral truths; if they were, they would not be fundamental. So fundamental moral truths are not explained by *anything*, and so have no truthmakers if truthmaking is explanatory.

[9] See also Simons (2005), Asay (2023).

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There are costs to Akhlaghi's approach (as he recognizes): it implies the controversial claim that some truths lack truthmakers. I would prefer to avoid this implication if possible. But Akhlaghi's result is nonetheless important for my purposes. For, regardless of whether we see truthmaking as a kind of modal tool for examining what a theory asks of our ontology or an explanatory tool that highlights substantive dependence relations, the relaxed realist can still avoid commitment.

§5: Classifying the Theory

I have argued that moral truths need not commit us to moral properties, no matter our views on ontological commitment. This allows a form of relaxed realism that does without moral properties. Such a view may be attractive; at the very least, it is both simpler and more ecumenical than extant formulations of relaxed realism.

But is this nominalist revision truly a form of *moral realism* if it denies that there are moral properties? And if it is not a form of moral realism, does this matter?

Answering either question is difficult. There is persistent disagreement about the meaning of 'moral realism'. Indeed, some, such as Foster and Schroeder (2023), have become skeptical that we can provide an informative, general account of the term. Still, we may fruitfully distinguish two broad views: the first sees moral realism as an ontological doctrine about moral properties; the second sees moral realism as an attitude toward morality.

Begin with the ontological interpretation. To be a moral realist is to believe that morality is part of reality—and so moral realism requires, of course, the existence of (instantiated) moral properties. As a result, describing any view as a nominalist form of *realism* is, at best, misleading.

However, this ontological account of moral realism seems anti-nominalist and so question begging. We might grant that if moral realism is true, then something moral must be part of reality. But must it be moral *properties*? Why not instead moral *objects*—right acts, virtuous persons, valuable outcomes?

Perhaps, however, ontological moral realism is not about the *existence* of moral properties but about their *relative standing*. Bloomfield and Copp (2023) argue that to be a realist is simply to allow moral properties the same ontological status as other properties. So if we are global property nominalists, then the nominalist metaethics I have described is a form of realism; otherwise, it is not.

Yet the question of parity strikes me as a red herring. Suppose I am an ontological nihilist and so believe in nothing. I give moral properties (and moral things, such as right acts) the same status as protons, buildings, and persons: all are unreal. I have then met the standards required by parity. But I am, I think, no moral realist.

Still, suppose I am mistaken and moral realism should indeed be understood as a thesis about the existence or status of moral properties. There remains the more pressing question of why it *matters* whether we are moral realists in this ontological sense.

Many relaxed realists reply that it does *not* matter—indeed, Parfit (2017: 59) simply abandoned the label of realism, instead opting for "non-realist cognitivism." But Parfit never abandoned the *attitude toward morality* that is characteristic of

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moral realism. This realist attitude is difficult to capture succinctly but, following Clarke-Doane (2020: 15-20), we can identify its markers: the realist attitude requires that moral claims have truth values, that some atomic moral claims are true, that moral judgments are beliefs, that moral truth is independent of our attitudes, and that moral claims may, in general, be interpreted at face value (they are not e.g. covert ways of expressing attitudes or describing what would be true according to some fiction).

Ontological moral realism can, of course, underwrite this realist attitude toward morality—and some moral realists, such as Shafer-Landau (2003: 13-18) and Enoch (2019), seem happy to conflate realism as an ontological thesis with realism as an attitude about morality. But if the nominalist view I have proposed is plausible, we should be wary of this conflation; the realist attitude toward morality can be justified by those who reject moral properties entirely. Indeed, just as global property nominalists may insist that judgments are beliefs, that truth is independent of our attitudes, and so on, local nominalists about moral properties may say that *moral* judgments are beliefs, that *moral* truth is independent of our attitudes, and so on.

Others have, of course, advanced theories which they claim can capture the realist's stance without their ontology. *Quasi-realists* (in)famously argue that we can begin from an expressivist metaethical program but earn the right to speak as the realist does. What difference is there between quasi-realism and the form of relaxed realism I have proposed?

The quasi-realist program remains controversial; stating the view succinctly is difficult. Yet, in any theory that begins with expressivism but aims to simulate realism, the expressivism must be retained *somehow*. Some, like Blackburn (1993), say that moral judgments, though truth-apt, are equivalent with or at least "begin life as" wishes, interjections, or other desire-like states. Dreier (2004) instead suggests that moral judgments are not desire-like states but we nonetheless possess moral judgments *because* of our desire-like states. Thus my belief that it is wrong to steal is not equivalent with any desire, plan, or command. But I can hold this belief only by disapproving of stealing, or planning not to steal, or accepting the command that none shall steal.

I take no stance on how the expressivist component of quasi-realism must be understood. But if there is *any* expressivism remaining in the quasi-realist program, this will be enough to allow the distinction I desire. The nominalist view I have proposed needs no expressivist component, any more than global property nominalists need be global expressivists. As a result, relaxed realism is distinct from both quasi-realism and traditional realism—and represents an important alternative to both.

§6: Conclusion

I have argued that relaxed realists are not ontologically committed to moral properties and so can dispense with them. This conclusion is prefaced on the claim that fundamental moral truths are not to be explained by appealing to what exists. Many will find this idea implausible—and I have done nothing to defend it here. In

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this way, it may seem that I have only moved the burden from the *ontology* of relaxed realism to the *ideology* of relaxed realism.

But even if I have only helped shift the spotlight, I believe this is the right place for the light to be. While many critics have focused on the metaphysics of the view, no purely ontological objection can undermine relaxed realism: the ontology of the view is both eliminable and explanatorily idle. This is not to suggest that the ontological arguments presented in e.g. Mintz-Woo (2018) or Enoch and McPherson (2017) fail—such arguments may indeed show that the particular formulations of relaxed realism that they target are unsatisfactory. But, if I am correct, such ontological arguments cannot give us reason to reject relaxed realism *in general*. The fundamental challenge to relaxed realism is not to understand the nature or role of lightweight moral properties but to justify the relaxed realist's claims about the relation between moral truth and reality.

Some answers to this challenge are immediately apparent: we might accept pluralism about truth and say that moral truth does not depend on reality. Or we might insist that truth is unitary but that explanation is plural: there is a peculiar kind of *moral* explanation (or grounding) possible for fundamental moral truths, but there is no *ontological* explanation or ground for these truths. Alternatively—and perhaps more boldly—we could deny pluralism about both truth and explanation but insist that only some truths are to be explained. Of course, we must then also defend some general view about explanation and grounding that allows that fundamental moral truths do not require explanation.

Of these three options, I take the third to be the most promising.[10] But I cannot adequately describe—much less evaluate—the relaxed realist's options here. I contend only that it is *these* choices about explanation that should concern us in developing the relaxed realist position. The ontology of the view is a distraction; it can be eliminated entirely, if we wish.[11]

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[10] The view I prefer appeals to the claim that fundamental moral truths are *transcendental* in roughly the sense described by Fine (2005). The application of Fine's metaphysics to morality is not novel; in their (2021), Howard and Laskowski suggest that some moral claims may be transcendental—though they do so in service of developing Parfit's *normativity objection*, not his broader metaethical program. Raven (2020) explores a similar Finean proposal in the ontology of logic.

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