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On L. W. Sumner's "Normative Ethics and Metaethics"*

Andrew T. Forcehimes

Due largely to the influential work of Ronald Dworkin,¹ there is an ongoing debate concerning the possibility of genuine metaethical theorizing. Those suspicious of the possibility of metaethics argue in two steps. The first step lays down a requirement, namely, *neutrality*: genuine metaethical theories must avoid having first-order normative commitments. The second step maintains that the nature of metaethical theorizing is such that a breach of neutrality is inevitable. The upshot of violating neutrality is that metaethical theories turn out to be moral theories in disguise. Call this case against metaethics the *collapse argument*.

One way to resist collapse is to reject neutrality.² The downside of this strategy is that it does little to persuade those who find neutrality intuitive. Neutrality, after all, is how the cut between metaethics and normative ethics is often made. Another response is to artificially generate metaethical theories that satisfy neutrality.³ Though this shows the possibility of metaethical theorizing, the contrived nature of these generated theories makes these victories pyrrhic. In his short and widely neglected paper, L. W. Sumner clarifies the collapse argument and provides a compelling third response.

Sumner accepts neutrality. Indeed, he takes the claim that metaethics is neutral to be analytic (100). But, he argues, the neutrality requirement needs further specification (97). More precisely, Sumner dis-

* A retrospective essay on L. W. Sumner, "Normative Ethics and Metaethics," *Ethics* 77 (1967): 95–106. All unattributed page references are to this article. I thank Rob Talisse, Luke Semrau, and Shannon Fyfe for valuable feedback on earlier drafts.

1. Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 87–139, and *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

2. See, e.g., Tristram McPherson, "Metaethics and the Autonomy of Morality," *Philosophers' Imprint* 8 (2008): 1–16.

3. See, e.g., James Dreier, "Meta-ethics and Normative Commitment," *Philosophical Issues* 12 (2002): 241–63.

tinguishes two kinds of moral commitments that a proposed metaethics might have: classificatory and substantive.⁴ Classificatory moral commitments are the product of delineating the scope of the moral domain, distinguishing the moral from the nonmoral (from the legal, aesthetic, or religious). Theories that have classificatory commitments do not violate neutrality. By contrast, a metaethical theory might have substantive moral commitments, commitments that have a normative bias in that they distinguish between the moral and the immoral. Theories that have substantive commitments violate neutrality. The question of the possibility of a genuine metaethics is thus: Can metaethical theorizing avoid substantive moral commitments?

To answer this question, we need to examine the second step of the collapse argument. What makes metaethical theories prone to violate neutrality? The obvious answer, as Sumner notes, is the subject matter. A complete metaethical theory will need to address both normative "matters of analysis" and "matters of justification" (101). Matters of analysis—for example, investigating the nature and function of moral terms—can, Sumner claims, be addressed neutrally (101). But matters of justification—for example, what is involved in justifying a moral judgment—should give the metaethicist pause. Insofar as a metaethical theory determines what reasons qualify as justificatory, violations of neutrality seem inescapable (102).

Given this, we can recast the second step of the collapse argument as a dilemma. Either a metaethical theory will address matters of justification or it won't. If it does, then a violation of neutrality seems unavoidable. If it doesn't, then the theory is incomplete.

We thus have a powerful articulation of the collapse argument. If, by Sumner's lights, metaethics (qua metaethics) must meet the twin goals of satisfying neutrality and addressing matters of justification, but these two demands are incompatible, then the very coherence of metaethical inquiry is in jeopardy.

However, metaethics is not doomed. The demand to address matters of justification can, as Sumner argues, be understood in two ways. On one characterization, a metaethical theory needs to tell us *how* moral judgments are to be justified (102). A theory, that is, should tell us which *types* of reasons are good or acceptable.⁵ Substantive commitments follow. A metaethical theory that, for example, tells us we must appeal to

4. Following Alan Gewirth, "Meta-ethics and Normative Ethics," *Mind* 69 (1960): 187–205.

5. Shelly Kagan draws on precisely this point to deny the independence of metaethics from normative ethics; see his *Normative Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 5–6. Kagan, however, takes genuine metaethical theorizing to be possible. We can thus lump him among those who reject the neutrality constraint.

such-and-such consequences to justify a moral judgment, collapses into a first-order moral theory. But we can understand matters of justification in a second way. A metaethical theory might tell us “what it is to justify a moral judgment, no matter what sort of justification is given” (103). Metaethics, on this characterization, identifies the form that moral reasoning must take. Metaethicists, in other words, distinguish the formal conditions that set moral reason-giving apart from the reason-giving involved in, say, supporting a statement of fact or a legal decision (103). Matters of justification are, accordingly, strictly classificatory. Taken in this second way, metaethical theories can address matters of justification while simultaneously respecting neutrality.

Distinguishing these two ways of characterizing matters of justification gives us two ways of defining metaethics: a *how* sense and a *what it is* sense. In the former, collapse is inevitable. In the latter, collapse is avoidable, at least in principle.

Sumner’s account thus provides a valuable test for identifying metaethical theories that succumb to collapse. But, importantly, it also shows that insofar as a theory restricts itself to matters of justification in the *what it is* sense, the second step of the collapse argument fails. Metaethics stands upright. Or, more modestly, if a theory sticks to the *what it is* sense of justification, the pressure generating collapse dissipates. This modest conclusion is, however, all that is required to vindicate the possibility of genuine metaethical theorizing.