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BOOK REVIEWS

Shafer-Landau, Russ, ed. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. Vol. 6.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 320. \$99.00 (cloth); \$40.00 (paper).

Oxford Studies in Metaethics is an annual publication featuring cutting-edge work on the foundations of ethics and normativity. Volume 6, like the previous volumes in the series, contains high-quality papers both by established figures and younger researchers in contemporary metaethics. Each paper deserves extended discussion. But, since this review must be brief, I will focus only on a few points of a few of the papers. I will close with a brief description of the contents of the remaining contributions.

The volume begins with an impressive pair of papers on the viability of quasi-realism—one a formidable critique by Sharon Street, well known for her evolutionary arguments against normative realism, the other a reply by Allan Gibbard, one of quasi-realism’s most prominent proponents. Quasi-realism involves a commitment to (a) certain characteristically realist claims—for example, that normative facts hold independently of the states of mind of the creatures they apply to (“the mind-independence thesis”), and (b) an expressivist semantics for normative language. By giving an expressivist interpretation of (e.g.) the mind-independence thesis, the quasi-realist attempts to capture certain realist intuitions without any unseemly metaphysical and epistemological baggage. (I will follow Street’s and Gibbard’s terminology in treating “realist” views as committed to the mind-independence thesis.)

Though many have challenged quasi-realism’s expressivist component, Sharon Street takes a different tack in her “Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can’t Have It Both Ways.” Street argues that the quasi-realist should reject her commitment to the mind-independence thesis even when the thesis is given an expressivist interpretation. The strategy: (a) spot the quasi-realist her expressivist interpretation of a certain characteristically realist claim *R*; (b) argue that certain characteristic objections to *R* can also be given an expressivist interpretation; (c) note that the quasi-realist thus has reasons to abandon her commitment to *R*, even when *R* is given an expressivist interpretation. The lesson: you can’t avoid debates concerning the metaphysics and epistemology of normative thought and talk simply by adopting an expressivist semantics. Street’s nuanced, careful argument makes an important contribution to our understanding of what sorts of considerations can properly be said to motivate quasi-realism.

I won’t focus here on the details of Street’s “Darwinian Dilemma” argument against the mind-independence thesis on its expressivist interpretation. Instead I would like to examine Street’s concluding reflections on the viability of expressivism, considered apart from the quasi-realist trappings, on the assumption that her argument is successful. Expressivism itself is a purely semantic position, a position about (perhaps *inter alia*) what the conventional meanings of nor-

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mative terms are and what is to be given explanatory priority in a theory of meaning. As such, Street acknowledges, “one may in principle be an expressivist without being a quasi-realist” (2). However, she provocatively asks, “What’s being accomplished by expressivism if the old debate about mind-independence continues? . . . If I’m going to accept a view according to which value depends on our evaluative attitudes *anyway*, then can’t *that very view* answer all the same questions expressivism answers, yet without expressivism’s difficulties?” (30–31). On behalf of the expressivist I would like to offer some preliminary thoughts in reply.

Street suggests (for illustrative purposes) that we accept Lewis’s mind-dependent thesis *D* about the nature of value: what it is for something to be valuable is for it to be such that we would desire to desire it under conditions of full imaginative acquaintance. This view, Street proposes, is superior to expressivism on several grounds. I will mention two. First, Street suggests that *D itself* “answer[s] all the same questions expressivism answers” (31). But this is misleading. Expressivism is a semantic view about the conventional meanings of normative terms. *D* is a (metaphysical or substantive normative) thesis about the nature of normativity. As such, it says nothing about the questions expressivism answers. What renders Street’s proposed alternative to expressivism just that—a genuine *alternative* to expressivism—is the claim *P* that normative sentences express or determine ordinary possible worlds propositions (with analyses like *D* used to supply the semantic contents of normative terms across contexts). But claims like (*a*) that we should treat the contents of normative sentences in this way (as determining sets of worlds) rather than as the expressivist claims (as determining sets of pairs of worlds and normative standards) and (*b*) that explanatory priority in a theory of meaning should be given to the knowledge of truth-conditions rather than to the satisfaction of norms regarding how expressions are conventionally used, are semantic and metasemantic claims that require independent defense, defense neither supplied by the mere truth of *D* nor offered (or purported to be offered) by Street in her paper. The expressivist is no worse off at the outset in her alternative position on these issues.

Second, Street claims that expressivism is inferior to *D + P* because “it leaves untouched the debate that really matters, namely, the debate about mind-independence” (2). This is unfair. *D + P* is a *conjunction* of a semantic thesis and a thesis about the nature of value. As such, it is to be compared not to expressivism itself but to quasi-realism, which does not leave the debate about mind-independence untouched. There are a range of questions we can ask that are legitimately metaethical. Yes, one important such question is the question of whether normative truths hold independently of our attitudes. But another question is what the conventional meanings of normative terms are. As Street’s own arguments helpfully bring out, we shouldn’t expect an answer to this latter question to involve a stake in the debate about mind-independence. It is no fault of an answer to one metaethical question that it doesn’t involve or entail an answer to them all.

In his “How Much Realism? Evolved Thinkers and Normative Concepts,” Allan Gibbard attempts to respond to Street’s formidable challenge to quasi-realism. What Gibbard calls “vast normative realism” insists that normative facts are subject to the same epistemic standards as paradigm scientific facts about

our manifest surroundings: if we're to have normative knowledge, our best scientific theories must provide a nontrivial story of why we would tend to track these normative facts. Gibbard grants Street that this sort of realism is epistemologically a nonstarter. However, he suggests an alternative. According to a "tempered" form of normative realism, though some normative facts are mind-independent, "they needn't have all the epistemic credentials of paradigm facts" (45). These "quasi-facts" need not be such that we can give a nontrivial story about how we reliably track them in order for us to know them. Normative facts emerge as subject to some of the epistemic standards for judging paradigm facts, but not those that would render the (quasi-)realist subject to the Darwinian Dilemma. By mimicking the tempered normative realist on this point, the quasi-realist, Gibbard argues, can maintain her commitment to the (expressivistically interpreted) mind-independence thesis.

Gibbard's move is characteristically thought provoking. It rightly challenges us to think harder about why we should hold normative facts up to the same epistemic standards as paradigm facts about our manifest surroundings. Though I won't discuss this question here, I do wish to raise a question about Gibbard's strategy. One might worry that Gibbard's response is ad hoc. Gibbard grants Street that "insist[ing] that normative facts are facts like any other dooms us to normative skepticism" (44). So he proposes that the epistemic standards for knowledge of normative facts are weaker than those for knowledge of ordinary facts *in just such a way as to avoid the Darwinian Dilemma*. Gibbard's tempered-realist-mimicking quasi-realist denies that the basic normative truths could be beyond our ken (44). But this seems to amount to no more than a stipulation. What independent reasons do we have for accepting the sort of normative epistemology Gibbard proposes? What sorts of facts other than normative facts are mind-independent but subject to these relaxed epistemic standards? Why should the fact that quasi-facts amount to restrictions on plans (as Gibbard's expressivism claims) exempt these quasi-facts from the epistemological requirements that apply to paradigm facts? Though there may be satisfying answers to these questions, one might worry that if none are found, Gibbard's response to Street ultimately amounts to a capitulation to the skeptic and the antirealist.

Switching gears, in "Passing the Deontic Buck" Matt Bedke defends a buck-passing account of all-things-considered deontic properties (like being required, permitted, forbidden, optional). On standard buck-passing views, an agent's being required, permitted, etc. to perform some act is metaphysically reducible to her first-order reasons for performing that act. After offering several objections to such views, Bedke proposes his positive "response-based analysis." On this view, deontic properties are to be reduced to (nonderivative, agent-neutral) reasons for corresponding performative responses. (I'll omit the parenthetical in what follows.) For example, an agent *A* is required to ϕ iff (if and only if) there is most reason to require *A* to ϕ .

A worry regarding Bedke's positive proposal: it seems that whether one has most reason to require an agent to do something can come apart from whether that agent is so required. Suppose, à la Sartre, that I must decide between helping my ailing mother and fighting in the Resistance. I have weighty reasons to help my mother and weighty reasons to leave and fight. Knowing that my decision is eating me up inside, my mother may take herself (correctly, let's suppose) to

have most reason—even quantifying only over nonderivative, agent-neutral reasons—to require me, say, to fight in the Resistance and to forbid me from staying to help her. After all, I must decide one way or the other, and her forbidding me from staying may help me make a decision I’ll be able to live with. But her (or anyone else with the requisite authority) having most reason to require me to fight doesn’t make me forbidden from helping her. Indeed, I ought to help her (even if I also ought to fight).

Bedke claims that his response-based analysis improves upon standard buck-passing views by (inter alia) better capturing the distinction between actions that are required and actions that we ought to perform. Bedke offers three cases that nicely highlight certain differences between strong necessity modals like ‘is required’ and ‘must’, on the one hand, and weak necessity modals like ‘ought’ and ‘should’, on the other. For space purposes I’ll focus on

OFFICE MEETING: Alf has an office meeting at noon. Though he ought to go—the overall weight of reasons supports his going—he isn’t required to; it’s permissible for him to either go or to not go. (130; slightly modified)

This is a problem for the standard view since it’s not the case that Alf is required to do what he has most reason to do. Bedke’s proposed solution is to analyze ‘is required’ in terms of reasons to require (as above) but analyze ‘ought’ in terms of the agent’s first-order reasons: an agent *A* ought to ϕ iff *A* has most first-order reasons to ϕ . This, Bedke claims, correctly predicts that Alf should go to the meeting (since he has most reason to do so) even though it’s not the case that he must (since we don’t have most reason to require him to go).

There is a growing body of recent research in formal semantics on the differences between weak and strong necessity modals. I’ll briefly suggest how the standard buck-passing theorist might appeal to two such differences to ward off Bedke’s objections and articulate an improved representation of tragic dilemmas. First, it has been argued that weak necessity modals, unlike strong necessity modals, abstract away from incomparabilities (see especially Eric Swanson’s “On the Treatment of Incomparability in Ordering Semantics and Premise Semantics,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 40 [2011]: 693–713). Roughly, on this view, ‘*A* ought to ϕ ’ is true iff for some way of bracketing tragic dilemmas ‘*A* is required to ϕ ’ is true. Second, it has been argued that weak necessity modals, unlike strong necessity modals, are interpreted with respect to certain secondary or subsidiary considerations (see, e.g., Kai von Fintel and Sabine Iatridou’s “How to Say *Ought* in Foreign: The Composition of Weak Necessity Modals,” in *Time and Modality*, ed. Jacqueline Guéron and Jacqueline Lecarme [Dordrecht: Springer, 2008], 115–41). For instance, if there are multiple ways for you get to some desired location, and if your only preference among routes concerns total travel time, it won’t be the case that, for any particular available route, you are required to take it; ‘is required’ is interpreted simply with respect to your goal of getting to your final destination. However, it will be the case that you ought to take the fastest route; ‘ought’ is also interpreted with respect to your secondary goal of traveling quickly.

To a first approximation, one way the standard buck-passer could incorporate these points is as follows: ‘*A* is required to ϕ ’ is true iff for all ways of resolving incomparabilities among a given set of primary reasons, *A* has most

reason to ϕ . And ‘ A ought to ϕ ’ is true iff for some way of resolving incompatibilities among a given set of primary and subsidiary reasons, A has most reason to ϕ (for further developments, see Silk’s “Modality, Weights, and Inconsistent Premise Sets” [unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan, 2011]). Call this revised version of the standard buck-passing analysis ‘STANDARD⁺’.

STANDARD⁺ seems to be an improvement. First, it may allow for a more natural representation of tragic dilemmas. (For the sake of argument, let’s make the minimal assumption that tragic dilemmas can at least be coherently expressed.) On Bedke’s construal, in a tragic dilemma there is no permissible act for the agent to perform. But the more common view, I take it, is that in such situations no matter what the agent does she fails to do something that she ought to do: A ought to ϕ and ought to ψ but cannot both ϕ and ψ . STANDARD⁺ captures this. In a tragic dilemma A ’s reasons for ϕ -ing are incomparable to her reasons for ψ -ing. So, supposing that on some way of resolving incompatibilities there is most reason to ϕ , and that on some other way of resolving incompatibilities there is most reason to ψ , ‘ A ought to ϕ ’ and ‘ A ought to ψ ’ will both be true. However, ‘ A is required to ϕ ’ and ‘ A is required to ψ ’ will be false since neither ϕ nor ψ is best supported by reasons on all ways of resolving incompatibilities.

Second, STANDARD⁺ yields the correct predictions to OFFICE MEETING. Assuming that there are no primary reasons that bear on the question of Alf’s going to the meeting (reasons that figure in the interpretation of ‘is required’) and that the relevant reasons are subsidiary reasons (reasons that figure in the interpretation of ‘ought’), we’ll get the right result that ‘Alf ought to go to the meeting’ is true and ‘Alf is required to go to the meeting’ is false.

Finally, one might worry that Bedke’s analysis, insofar as it represents ‘ought’ and ‘is required’ in structurally independent terms, fails to capture certain semantic properties of these items. For instance, it isn’t obvious how it can capture how ‘is required’ sentences (asymmetrically) entail their counterparts with ‘ought’: my having most first-order reasons to ϕ isn’t entailed by one’s having most reasons to require me to ϕ . STANDARD⁺ preserves this entailment pattern.

In these ways, by incorporating insights from the formal semantics literature the standard buck-passer may be able to respond to Bedke’s objections and offer a more unified, empirically adequate analysis of oughts and requirements.

The remaining papers in the volume make important contributions on a wide range of metaethical issues. One recent hot topic in metaethics concerns the debate over subjectivism and objectivism, or whether an agent’s normative reasons are always grounded in facts about her motivational attitudes. David Sobel defends a version of subjectivism that allows one’s future desires to ground facts about one’s present reasons. This account, Sobel argues, avoids Derek Parfit’s “Agony Argument.” Chris Heathwood defends objectivism against the argument from matters of mere taste. Julia Markovits offers several fascinating arguments for her favored version of subjectivism that are independent of many of the standard philosophical motivations for subjectivism (e.g., reductive naturalism, the Humean theory of motivation).

Richard Joyce and Jonas Olson examine moral error theory. Joyce defends the surprising conclusion that several prominent metaethical theories, contrary to initial appearances, commit their proponents to a moral error theory. Olson

argues that even if error theory is true, we should embrace genuine moral beliefs and assertions rather than adopt a fictive attitude toward them as moral fictionalists suggest.

Sarah McGrath's insightful contribution examines several ways in which experience plays a crucial role in the acquisition of moral knowledge, ways, she argues, that are consistent with that knowledge being a priori. Campbell Brown offers a new version of Frank Jackson's argument for ethical descriptivism, one that avoids making linguistic assumptions and is "metaphysical all the way through" (206). Paul Katsafanas rejects the common assumption in action theory that reflective actions are paradigm cases of agential activity. He argues that, since motives can influence the process of reflection itself, reflection does not suspend the effects of an agent's motives. Finally, Ralph Wedgwood defends the existence of instrumental rationality and, with characteristic care, delineates a general account of what is essential to it.

Like the previous volumes in Shafer-Landau's *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, volume 6 is characterized by careful argument and nuanced insight. It is essential reading for anyone with prior interests in metaethics.

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