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NORMATIVE ETHICS AND METAETHICS

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DURING the past twenty years or so a certain theory in the methodology of ethics has gradually become more and more widely accepted, at least by British and American moral philosophers, to the point where it may now fairly be called the orthodox theory. This position has it that there are two quite different ways of going about the business of doing ethics and that the wise practitioner will take pains not to confuse them. The first sort of ethical inquiry is most commonly called normative ethics and is held to consist in the investigation into what actions are right, are our duty, or ought to be done, what motives are good or praiseworthy, what characters are virtuous, etc., and especially into the most general principles obtainable concerning these matters. The second sort of endeavor open to the moral philosopher is usually known as metaethics, and it is allegedly constituted, at least in part, by questions of the meanings of the various ethical terms and the functions of ethical utterances. The theory that distinguishes these two sorts of inquiry has some additional features as well, of which we may here mention, in a preliminary way, two. The first is that metaethics differs most completely from its normative counterpart in the fact that it has nothing to say concerning the rightness of acts, makes no moral recommendations whatsoever, is entirely neutral as to which moral principles one is to adopt to guide one's affairs. And, second, the claim is often made that the proper office of the ethical *philosopher* is metaethics, normative concerns being better left to such as journalists, politicians, and preachers.

The process by which the orthodox theory has come to be accepted is itself an interesting one. It would be wrong to suppose that ethical theorists just gradually and, as it were, without fully realizing it, adopted this new bifurcation of their subject. (Indeed it would probably be wrong to suppose that the bifurcation was especially new.) Rather, what may now be called the orthodox position has had both its critics and its defenders;[1] and these have provided a running discussion of the virtues of the position. The result has been a spate of articles, even books, on second-order questions in ethics: questions concerning, not the adequacy of this or that particular ethical theory, but what sorts of problem ethical theories in general are designed to deal with. Nevertheless, despite the fact of increasing awareness of deep-seated methodological problems in ethics, the debate concerning the normative-metaethical distinction has been disappointing in two closely related ways. First, there have been no adequate, detailed, painstaking statements by its defenders of the distinction itself, what it is, what is its value. And, second, the critics of the distinction have also failed to assail it successfully; their attacks have too often simply failed to touch the points that are really at issue.

In this paper I wish to begin by defending the second of these allegations (the first will be defended presently). Since it will be impossible to discuss all

the works in which the orthodox theory has been criticized, I shall select one specific (and I believe typical) instance for examination. This is an article by Alan Gewirth entitled "Meta-ethics and Normative Ethics" (see note 1). I will attempt to show how Gewirth's attack fails to disturb the normative-metaethical distinction itself, and I will claim that this failure is typical of the usual criticisms. Having done this, I will then proceed to examine the distinction, and its tenability, anew.

I

The general strategy of Gewirth's criticism is to launch a frontal attack against the dichotomy in question: "I wish in this paper to examine the legitimacy of the distinction between meta-ethics and normative ethics, with the correlative restriction of the philosopher to meta-ethics" (p. 188). The thesis to be proved is that there is ultimately no distinction to be made here, because all apparently metaethical inquiries reduce in the end to normative ones. Gewirth is thus committed to supporting a very strong contention indeed, namely, that there is, and can be, no such enterprise as metaethics, that a non-normative metaethics is impossible. To support this contention has been the general intent of the more prominent critics of the normative-metaethical distinction.

Gewirth's first step is to establish the real basis of the distinction, what the irreducible difference between normative ethics and metaethics is alleged to be. He finds this, quite rightly I think, to lie in the thesis of the "moral neutrality" of metaethics. Gewirth analyzes this claim into two distinct subclaims: "(*A*) Meta-ethics implies or presupposes no specific normative ethical doctrines, so that *the same meta-ethics is compatible with different and even opposed normative ethics;* and (*B*) Normative ethics implies or presupposes no specific meta-ethical doctrines, so that *the same normative ethics is compatible with different and even opposed meta-ethics*. It will be noted that these two views are logically distinct" (p. 188; italics in the original).

Now the thesis of moral neutrality itself raises some thorny problems which Gewirth's analysis does nothing to solve,[2] but these are not what I wish to discuss here. Rather, I want to ask, given the above claim that all meta-ethical theories are morally neutral, just what it is that Gewirth wishes to establish in opposition to this. Now I take it that he is not merely arguing for the contradictory of this claim; that is, he is not satisfied to show that *some* meta-ethical theories are not morally neutral, while leaving it open whether some others *are*. Rather, he wants to establish the truth of the contrary of the above position: he wants to show that *no* meta-ethical theory is or can be morally neutral in the required sense.[3] Actually, as it turns out, Gewirth's conclusion is somewhat weaker than this, but, since it appeared to be his original intention to establish the strong conclusion (for he is questioning "the legitimacy of the distinction between meta-ethics and normative ethics"), we shall take this as the direction of his inquiry.

I do not intend here to discuss Gewirth's entire argument. In his analysis (above) of the thesis of moral neutrality, he finds it to consist of two subtheses, (*A*) and (*B*). Since it is (*A*) that most philosophers who have defended the distinction in question have been most anxious to establish, and since Gewirth's argument is, I think, more instructive on this point, I shall

discuss this only and omit consideration of his criticism of (*B*).

Gewirth, then, is committed to arguing that no metaethical theory can be morally neutral or, if we take moral neutrality as part of the meaning of "metaethics," that there is no such thing as metaethics. How does he go about this? To begin with, Gewirth shows a healthy appreciation of what sort of argument will *not* do the job: "It is by no means an adequate or cogent refutation of this view to point out that metaethicists make normative judgments, or even that they make such judgments in the same books in which they present their meta-ethics. For to hold that meta-ethics is neutral with regard to normative ethics does not entail that the meta-ethicist, as a person but not *qua* meta-ethicist, may not have normative ethical convictions and express them in his works. All that is required is that such convictions not be presented as necessary consequences or antecedents of the meta-ethics" (p. 189).

Something stronger is thus required, and Gewirth begins constructing his own argument by distinguishing two senses of the term "moral." In what he calls the "positive" sense, the word functions merely as a classificatory term, for example, in delineating what are moral questions, judgments, principles as opposed to legal, aesthetic, prudential, religious, etc. Here the opposite of "moral" is "non-moral." But the term also has a "normative" sense in which it functions as a value term indicating the speaker's approval of an individual ("Jones is a scrupulously moral man"), his actions ("He always tries to do what is moral"), his character ("He has had a moral upbringing"), etc. Here the contrasting term is not "non-moral" but "immoral." Now Gewirth goes on to say that, insofar as a theory attempts to produce criteria for the use of the term "moral," it is neutral (and hence metaethical) only to the extent that it analyzes the *positive* sense of the term. That is, a metaethical theory is one that reproduces the characteristics that belong to *any* moral code, be it that of Christ or Eichmann. The metaethicist is not entitled to exercise his own preference here in the choice of moral codes to come within the scope of the analysis; his account must merely list the features common to *all* moralities or else lay itself open to the charge of exhibiting a normative bias. To offer an account of the meaning of the term "moral" that covers only those moralities of which the analyst approves is to analyze only the normative sense of the term and is, in fact, simply to do normative ethics.

Here is where Gewirth's consideration of actual metaethical theories begins. First he offers some general opinions about the emotivism of Stevenson and the prescriptivism of Hare, concluding: "Their aim is to present an analysis which shall fit all the uses of 'good' and 'ought,' and all the chief methods by which sentences using these words are supported. . . . No normative ethical questions enter—no questions as to what is the morally better way of using these words or the morally better way of supporting such sentences. The approach is purely descriptive, i.e., positive" (p. 193).

So far so good, but Gewirth continues: "But even if the positivists' interpretation of the meaning of ethical terms is justified insofar as they are looking for a generic analysis of what is common to all ethics, this still leaves unsettled the question of the proper

analysis of normative ethics. Granted that we can find something common to the utterances of Schweitzer and Capone, still, insofar as we do not regard Capone as a (normatively) moral man, while we do regard Schweitzer as one, can our meta-ethics enable us to tell what is the difference between them? Recent meta-ethicists have been answering this question in the affirmative" (p. 193). And again: "There are many signs that . . . recent meta-ethicists have been grasping this point that to deal generically with the evaluative or prescriptive or emotive features of the language common to positive and normative ethics still leaves unsettled the question of the distinctive logic of the language of normative ethics" (p. 195).

Here, then, is the crux of the matter. Gewirth will argue, as he himself has put it, that metaethicists "seem to be driven, as it were, to a concern with normative ethics as against positive ethics by the demands of their subject matter. Their task is incomplete so long as they deal with the moral language of cannibals and missionaries, Capones and Schweitzers, as if they were morally on a par" (p. 192). And here is where we begin to get into some difficulty. For Gewirth goes about trying to prove this thesis by pointing to actual instances in the writings of Hare, Falk, Toulmin, Duncan-Jones, and Hampshire in which these philosophers have represented as part of the (positive) meaning of the term "moral" (i.e., as a necessary constituent of all moral codes and theories) what (Gewirth claims) is a feature only of those particular moralities that these theorists happen to favor. The particular point that Gewirth challenges in each of these cases is the claim that all *moral* judgments are, as such, in some sense universalizable:

> . . . one of the central points of these [accounts] is that ethical judgments must be, or must be based on considerations that are, impartial or universalizable, as against the subjective, partial, or idiosyncratic traits of judgments that are non-moral or immoral. From these emphases it follows that their meta-ethics is not morally neutral in either of the two senses indicated above. For (*A*) in respect of *selecting* the subject-matter to be analysed, the meta-ethicist selects for study those kinds of language and action in which what he regards as peculiarly moral traits—those of *normative* ethics—are discerned, as against the various kinds of language or conduct in which persuasion, goading, or expression of attitudes occurs. And (*B*) in respect of *evaluating* the subject-matter to be analysed, the meta-ethicist, by thus selecting, is at least implicitly making a normative ethical judgment; for he is distinguishing the 'moral' not only from the *non-moral* but also from the *immoral* [p. 195; italics in the original].

From this Gewirth derives the conclusion that "the analysis of normative ethics requires a normative commitment on the part of the analyst" (p. 196) and that (at least in some cases) "the task of the metaethicist is not distinguishable from that of the normative ethicist" (p. 205).

Now I wish to suggest that Gewirth's argument is, as a whole, faulty in at least two important ways:

1. The most crucial single contention in the above account is the last, the claim that universalizability is not in fact a feature of all moral judgments (in the positive sense of "moral"). The theorists Gewirth mentions (and especially Hare) have made the claim that a non-universalizable judgment does not, by virtue of the fact that it is non-universalizable, warrant being called a moral judgment, in this neutral, classificatory, descriptive sense of the term "moral." If they are right (i.e., if they have correctly reproduced the meaning of the term), then their theories (or at

least this part of their theories) are morally neutral; if they are wrong (i.e., if universalizability pertains only to some moral principles, namely, those attractive to the analyst), then they may be charged with merely exhibiting their normative bias. But the point is that it is at least not obvious whether or not universalizability is part of the meaning of the term "moral" in its positive sense. Gewirth has given no argument whatsoever to show that it is not; rather, he has simply baldly stated that this is the case. Surely rather more is required than this. What is required is the production of some straightforward cases in which what everyone (or at any rate most qualified persons) would admit is a moral judgment or principle (in the neutral positive sense of the term) is nevertheless not universalizable. By failing to produce such cases Gewirth has not even gotten his over-all argument off the ground, for he has neglected to show where *any* allegedly metaethical theory is not neutral. In fact, he seems rather to admit that at least one such neutral theory exists, namely, Stevenson's brand of emotivism.[4]

2. So far, however, we have taken issue only on a specific contention which, however difficult the procedure may be, presumably is capable of being shown true or false. I now wish to claim that Gewirth's argument also contains a fallacy, that there is something seriously amiss with his *method*. In order to do so, I want to consider what the state of Gewirth's argument would be if his contention concerning the status of the thesis of universalizability were correct. Suppose that the claim that all moral judgments are universalizable *does* reflect a normative bias. What will Gewirth then have shown about metaethics and the normative-metaethical distinction? My contention is that about *these* matters he will have shown precisely nothing.

For consider what would be the case if it were to turn out that universalizability was a disguised normative thesis. This would mean that a number of recent apparently metaethical theories were in reality covertly normative in character insofar as they persisted in holding this thesis. Two things are here to be noticed: (*a*) this is a quasi-historical claim about the status of certain theories which had been thought to be metaethical in character; (*b*) these theories will, so far as the argument has gone, regain their neutrality by dropping the universalizability thesis. The first point is the crucial one. Gewirth, if he succeeds at all, will succeed in showing that certain theories thought to be morally neutral by their authors, and by others, are not so. And, if we take moral neutrality to be an essential defining feature of metaethics, then he has shown that some theories ordinarily thought to be metaethical are in reality not metaethical at all. To say all this is only to criticize the practice of some supposed metaethicists; it is not to say anything about the possibility of *metaethics* at all. One does not show that something cannot be done by showing that someone or some group has tried it and failed. But the second point (above) is also important, for Gewirth's argument not only does not show that metaethics is impossible, it suggests that the opposite is the case, for any theory containing the thesis of universalizability can regain the neutrality by dropping the thesis. In the case of most metaethical theories this would still leave a good deal of substance.

It is important to stress the point

that the claim that metaethics is morally neutral is ordinarily an *analytic* one. This means that if one discovers a theory previously believed to be metaethical which is not morally neutral this is knockdown proof that it is *not* metaethical, but it says nothing about the possibility of metaethics. Now admittedly it might be possible in some circumstances to argue from the practice of (supposed) metaethicists to the impossibility of metaethics. If one found that literally *all* theories which had been taken to be metaethical contained covert normative claims, and that these claims were *always* so central that to abandon them was to abandon the theory, then one might grow a little suspicious of the method these philosophers had been pursuing. Even this would not prove that metaethics was impossible, but it might incline us to wonder, if we found that the best minds of our generation had not been able to manage it. The reply to this is that it is highly unlikely that *all* supposed metaethical theories do contain normative elements, that to show that they to would take considerably more argument than Gewirth or any other critic of metaethics has cared to provide, and that Gewirth at least has as much as admitted that there are morally neutral ethical theories in his discussion of Stevenson.

Gewirth has thus in fact said nothing about *metaethics,* only about a very narrow sample of (supposed) metaethical theories, which excludes all emotivist, naturalist, and intuitionist accounts. There are two possible ways of relating this conclusion to Gewirth's own conception of his method of argument. One is to say that Gewirth recognized from the first what sort of argument was required (i.e., one that is able to show that metaethicists "seem to be driven, as it were, to a concern with normative ethics as against positive ethics by the demands of their subject-matter") but failed to provide it, since he could not show why a metaethical theory was *required* to delve into normative matters. Indeed the whole point seems to be that it is required, and able, not to. The other is to claim that Gewirth was confused from the outset as to what sort of argument was required. We noted earlier his recognition of certain arguments that would not do the job. It can now be seen that this elimination did not go nearly far enough: no amount of pointing out inconsistencies in the practice of some of those commonly taken to be metaethicists can show that metaethics is impossible or that there are conceptual difficulties in the normative-metaethical distinction.

I have spent some time discussing Gewirth's argument, and especially its method, because I believe that it is typical of the more prominent criticisms of the distinction between normative ethics and metaethics. These accounts generally announce their purpose as an attack on the very notion of metaethics and then proceed (not always successfully) to an attack on specific metaethicists. Nevertheless, the tenor of this paper should not be taken to be primarily negative. If there is a method of argumentation against the concept of metaethics that is futile, there is another that may achieve at least some limited success and that incorporates to some extent the spirit of the first. It is to a delineation of this mode of criticism that I now turn.

II

Clearly the lesson of the previous section is that if we want to show that

metaethics is impossible we must show that there is something radically wrong with the whole notion of it, and not just with the practice of some who have attempted to do it. Thus the crucial questions to be asked become: What is meant by the term "metaethics"? What are the criteria to be satisfied by a theory in order for it properly to be called metaethical? Is the concept of metaethics a coherent one?

In order to answer such questions as these it is necessary to examine the accounts of those who have asserted the existence of the subject called metaethics.[5] How have they described this subject? What sort of questions does a metaethical theory answer? I shall here reproduce five characteristics that are unanimously agreed by metaethicists to be features of their subject and that will provide a basis for discussion of that subject.

1. The first we have already mentioned. A metaethical theory is among other things an ethical theory that is morally neutral. To say this is to say that it neither is a normative theory nor implies any normative theory or principle, that is, that it embodies no substantive moral commitments, where some theory is usually held as to what constitutes a normative principle and a moral commitment.

2. There is closely related to this a further and somewhat more specific feature. The reason that metaethics embodies no normative commitment is that it is a second-order study of the logic of normative language. That is, metaethics is related to normative ethics as philosophy of science to science; normative theory and normative language in general are the subjects of its investigation.

3. Related to this again is another characteristic. Metaethics does not conduct just any sort of study of normative ethics. Rather, it is concerned especially to elaborate and criticize the presuppositions upon which normative theories are erected, presuppositions concerning the nature of normative language. The purpose of metaethics then becomes that of rendering normative problems easier of solution by sending the normative theorist to his task with a clearer head concerning his own assumptions. One might call this the theory of metaethics as a prolegomenon or propaedeutic to the study of normative problems.

4. We have thus far said nothing concerning *what* a metaethical theory has to say about normative, and especially moral, language. The consensus of metaethicists is that there are two major concerns that jointly constitute the subject matter of metaethics. The first we shall simply call "matters of analysis," and these encompass such questions as: What are the meanings of the prominent ethical terms? Can these words be defined in non-ethical terms? What is the function of moral judgments? For what purposes are they used? How do they differ from other sorts of statements? And so on.

5. The second major concern of a metaethical theory we shall call "matters of justification." Here some of the questions ordinarily asked are the following: How are moral judgments to be justified? What reasons constitute a valid defense of such judgments? What sort of activity is reason-giving in such circumstances? How is it related to defending orders, requests, statements of fact, etc.? And so on.

Each of these five features is sufficiently prominent in the accounts given by metaethicists of the nature of their

subject, and therefore sufficiently central to the notion of metaethics, to constitute a defining characteristic of that notion. I am not particularly concerned with whether this list is complete, that is, whether there are other items that could be added without controversy. I am satisfied that these five items at least are uncontroversial, in the sense that they are backed by a broad consensus among metaethicists themselves. Under this characterization, metaethics is a morally neutral study of normative language whose purpose is to aid in the solution of normative problems and which consists in a theory of the analysis and justification of normative judgments. Now the question to be asked about this notion, so explicated, is: Is it coherent? Can there be such a subject as metaethics, so understood? Or is there something *logically* wrong with the subject? If the notion of metaethics, as we have described it, is logically impeccable, then we shall have to agree that, so far as can be ascertained a priori, metaethics is a possible, and perhaps valuable, endeavor. If the opposite is the case, if the very concept of metaethics is incoherent, then no such subject can exist, and the sooner it is forgotten the better. Now, which is the case?

My major contention in this paper is that it is impossible to answer this question without further examination of one of the five features of a metaethical theory, since that feature is, as we have stated it, highly ambiguous. Further, whether metaethics is to be classified as a possible enterprise or an impossible one depends on how this ambiguity is resolved. The feature in question is that according to which metaethics has something to say about the justification of moral judgments.

Part of the problem is that in the usual accounts of metaethicists we are told little more than this, that metaethics has "something to say" about matters of justification. If we are given more, it consists generally of a list of sample questions on this subject, such as the ones we reproduced earlier. The trouble is that in virtually all of these accounts there is an important lacuna: we are not told *what* metaethics has to say about "matters of justification," and it appears that there exist at least two very different possibilities.

An ethical theory may, on the one hand, state how moral judgments are to be justified, what sorts of reasons are acceptable in defense of them and what are not, what comprises a valid justification, what reasons are good reasons and what are bad, etc. Here to say that such and such represents a justification of a moral judgment (and ultimately of an action) is to make a value judgment about the reason that has been offered, to state one's opinion that it is a *good* reason (that it does justify the action). Consequently, in these situations one might use expressions of the sort "Appeal to considerations of type X always justifies a moral judgment" or "To defend such a judgment one *must* appeal to reasons of sort Y." Restriction of the range of reasons to which one may appeal in justifying a moral judgment thus merely duplicates a normative ethical inquiry. To say, for instance, that one must always appeal to certain sorts of consequences in justifying one's moral judgments is simply to recommend that one always aim in action at those consequences. This sort of inquiry into "matters of justification," therefore, which I shall call the investigation into *how* moral judgments are to be

justified, is just a normative inquiry restated in second-order terms.

There is an alternative to this sort of account. One may instead discuss the justification of moral judgments without in any way limiting the range of reasons that may legitimately be offered. One can ask *what it is* to justify a moral judgment, no matter *what sort* of justification is given. We are familiar with a variety of situations in which we offer reasons for an utterance of one sort or another, in which we defend something we have said. Each of these situations is likely to resemble the rest in some ways and differ in others. Thus, to offer reasons in support of a statement of fact differs in certain respects from defending an order or directive, and this in turn from supporting a recommendation or piece of advice and justifying a legal decision. In each case, whatever the statement to be supported and whatever the reasons offered in defense of it, the justification will have at least to take a certain specified *form*. One may ask, therefore, how justifying a moral judgment (or offering reasons in support of a moral judgment, if the term "justify" seems unalterably attached to the speaker's approbation of the reasons offered) resembles and differs from each of these other occasions of reason-giving. That is to say, the term "justify" (or "defend" or "support" or "offer reasons for") may have certain requirements attached to it in specifically moral situations. Thus, for example, to be said to justify a moral judgment one may at least have to produce some general principle, however vague or complicated, under which one is able to subsume it. Apart from the acceptability of one's reasons, one cannot be said even to have attempted to justify one's judgment unless one offers *some* reasons, and not just anything can count as a reason, at least without further elaboration. We speak of situations in which a person refused even to attempt to justify his actions, where we mean that he offered no reasons whatsoever for what he did; if one does attempt to justify one's actions or judgments, on the other hand, one must follow *some* rules (e.g., of relevance), and presumably it is possible to spell these out, at least to some extent. There thus appears to exist a sort of inquiry into the justification of moral judgments, which I shall call that into *what it is* to justify such judgments, which involves taking no (normative) stand on what reasons are good reasons, acceptable reasons, or valid reasons.

We thus have two types of inquiry into "matters of justification," one of which is and the other of which is not morally neutral. And, depending on which sort of investigation we take to be characteristic of a metaethical theory, we thus have two possible definitions of metaethics. A metaethical theory may be a morally neutral inquiry that tells us how moral judgments are to be justified or it may be a morally neutral inquiry that tells us what it is to justify a moral judgment. The important thing to be noticed here is that one of these definitions is coherent, the other not. The former is incoherent because it contains contradictory requirements: a theory of that sort must be both morally neutral and not morally neutral. Conversely, the latter is coherent, since the sort of inquiry into "matters of justification" which it involves is consistent with the requirement of moral neutrality. Thus the following situation pertains: under one definition metaethics is impossible because the notion is self-contradictory; under an-

other it is possible, at least so far as logic can advise us. Now which way is the term to be defined?

Before examining this question we may note how the above criticism carries on the spirit of the attacks of Gewirth and those who share his intent. Gewirth's purpose was to show how metaethicists were "driven to a concern with normative ethics . . . by the demands of their subject-matter," but he succeeded at best in showing only that some supposed metaethicists did *in fact* stray into such a concern. If the former of the two definitions of metaethics (above) is accepted, then one can indeed say that metaethicists are *required* to consider normative problems and that a non-normative metaethics is consequently impossible, since not to deal with those problems would be not to do metaethics, if we take the inquiry into how moral judgments are to be justified as a defining feature of metaethics. The present method thus at least provides the hope of achieving what the former could not, namely, a conclusion about the nature of metaethics itself.

But if this is its hope, its limitations are strict. For there is still the problem of what definition of metaethics is to be accepted, and why. The accounts of metaethicists help us little here, since, as already pointed out, they are generally quite uninformative. Still, there is one reason at least for concluding that metaethics is, by its own definition, incoherent. For when metaethicists do say something specific on the subject of what it is that a metaethical theory has to say about matters of justification, they tend more often than not to claim that it can tell us how moral judgments are to be justified.[6] The startling thing is that a large number, and perhaps even a majority, of metaethicists thus appear to have an incoherent notion of the nature of their own subject. One may then be forgiven for harboring the sentiment that such lack of vision deserves the conclusion that this subject is impossible.

Still, there are more immediate reasons for concluding the opposite, that is, for accepting a definition of metaethics that is at least consistent. To refuse this alternative is to win but a hollow victory, for the important question still remains: are any of the positions of those commonly called metaethicists morally neutral? Suppose, as I think is the case, that some of these theories (e.g., some versions of the emotive theory) are able to pass the test of moral neutrality. If we have decided that metaethics is a self-contradictory notion, then these cannot be called metaethics, but then we shall have to find some new name for a morally neutral ethical inquiry. Given that there are non-normative ethical theories, and given that we talk this way already, why not simply call these metaethics? We lose nothing, since any criticism of theories that masquerade as neutral but are covertly normative still stands: we can simply point out that they are not metaethical, instead of using the mass examples of the impossibility of the subject. And we gain much in ease of classification of recent ethical theories. Perhaps the matter can best be put this way: if we consider the contradictory notion of a morally neutral inquiry into how moral judgments are to be justified, then the contradiction may be resolved in one of two ways. One may drop the requirement of moral neutrality, in which case one is doing normative ethics. Or one may drop the inquiry into the justification of moral

judgments (or, which is more likely, substitute a different, and morally neutral, sort of inquiry into this matter), in which case one is doing—what? I suggest that we continue to call this metaethics.

It thus appears to me that, while there is some justification for concluding from the way metaethicists describe their own enterprise that it is impossible, it is more sensible to take the moderate approach and hold that metaethics, so long as one is careful how he defines it, is possible, although many allegedly metaethical theories may fail to meet its requirements. This way of speaking at least gives us some ground for classifying current ethical theories, since (I would contend) there are both theories that satisfy and theories that (intentionally or otherwise) fail to satisfy the requirement of moral neutrality. And if we take this line we may then get down to the much more interesting and fruitful questions of what sorts of metaethical (and normative) theory are possible and how to go about them.

I would not wish what I have said here to be construed as a blanket defense of the subject of metaethics nor as a suggestion that discussions of the propriety of the normative-metaethical distinction are always somehow sterile. There is much to criticize in the distinction, or rather in those who have attempted to draw it, chiefly the almost appalling failure of these latter to apply a suitable degree of critical reflection to their enterprise. There are puzzles in the dichotomy, for instance (as Mary Mothersill has pointed out), that even to draw the distinction (which involves characterizing the nature of normative theory) appears to be itself to do metaethics. These puzzles and difficulties are eminently worth discussion, so long as they do not keep us too long from the business of actually doing metaethics, and so long as this in turn does not keep us indefinitely from the business of actually doing normative ethics, where, after all, our concern with ethics presumably began. My chief suspicion of the subject of metaethics derives from a vague uneasiness about prolegomena in general, namely, that they have an unhealthy way of coming to usurp the place of those subjects to whose prosecution they were intended to be of assistance. The reason for my "defense" of metaethics has been that I have found discussions of the "possibility" of the subject particularly frustrating, and I have wanted to set down what I take to be the mileage one can get out of this question.

In sum, I have tried to argue for the following position:

1. To derive the conclusion "metaethics is impossible" one must do more than debate the success of particular (supposed) metaethical theories.

2. One can, if one takes the testimony of metaethicists at face value, draw the conclusion that metaethics is an incoherent notion and hence impossible, but doing so solves no important problems and amounts simply to announcing how one plans to talk.

3. It is far more desirable to define metaethics in a more adequate way than even most metaethicists have cared to, since it appears that we must simply live with the fact that neutral ethical theories exist and that the term "metaethics" is very much in place when applied to them.

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NOTES

1. Some of the more prominent defenders of the orthodox theory are listed in n. 5. Among its critics are the following: F. A. Olafson, "Meta-ethics and the Moral Life," *Philosophical Review,* LXV (April, 1956), 159–78; P. W. Taylor, "The Normative Function of Meta-ethics," *Philosophical Review,* LXVII (January, 1958), 16–32; and A. Gewirth, "Meta-ethics and Normative Ethics," *Mind,* LXIX (April, 1960), 187–205. These constitute the most direct and best known attacks on the normative-metaethical dichotomy. Also relevant, however, are: E. M. Adams, "Classical Moral Philosophy and Metaethics," *Ethics,* LXXIV, No. 2 (1964), 97–110; R. M. Gordon, "Socratic Definitions and 'Moral Neutrality,'" *Journal of Philosophy,* LXI, No. 15 (1964), 443–50; M. Mothersill, "Moral Philosophy and Meta-ethics," *Journal of Philosophy,* XLIX, No. 18 (1952), 587–94; "The Use of Normative Language," *Journal of Philosophy,* LII, No. 15 (1955), 401–11; and "Agents, Critics and Philosophers," *Mind,* LXIX (October, 1960), 443–46.

2. Some of the questions that might be asked here are: Is it statements, or theories, or both that are morally neutral? If the former, how is it to be determined when a given statement is morally neutral? Is it a matter of its not having any *moral* implications, or must it be free of *all* normative implications, including non-moral ones? What sort of "implication" is involved here? Are certain *terms* inherently normative, so that any statement that uses them is *ipso facto* normative also? Or is it rather a matter of what the statement is used for, what is done with it? Is normativeness to be attached to certain functions of utterances, e.g., prescribing or recommending? If so, how do we tell when, say, a theory involves certain recommendations? Thus far no satisfactory examination of these problems has been forthcoming from defenders of the notion of a morally neutral meta-ethics.

3. Or, rather, if we take moral neutrality to be analytic of the term "metaethics," Gewirth wishes to show that there is no such subject.

4. Cf. Gewirth, *op. cit.*, p. 193. Note that Gewirth does not subsequently accuse Stevenson of stepping across the boundary into normative ethics.

5. Some of the better known of these accounts are the following: H. D. Aiken, "Moral Philosophy and Education," *Reason and Conduct* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1962); A. J. Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgments," *Horizon,* XX, No. 117 (1949), 171–84; R. B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), chap. i; W. K. Frankena, "Moral Philosophy at Mid-century," *Philosophical Review,* LX (January, 1951), 44–55; *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), chaps. i, vi; R. M. Hare, "Broad's Approach to Moral Philosophy," in Paul Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of C. D. Broad* (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1959); "Ethics," in J. O. Urmson (ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960); C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 1; *Facts and Values* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), Preface; and P. W. Taylor (ed.), *The Moral Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), Introduction. That the five characteristics attributed to metaethics in the text are quite universally agreed to belong to it may be verified by checking any of these sources, and others.

6. This may be verified by examining the accounts listed in n. 5. In the majority of cases the writer at the very least includes questions of how moral judgments are to be justified ("good reasons" questions) in the purview of metaethics.